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帥氣英雌女主角：《櫻蘭高校男公關部》（2002）中的女
扮男裝

Handsome Heroines: Female Cross-Dressing in
Ouran High School Host Club (2002)

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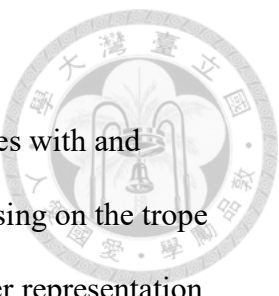
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Abstract



This thesis investigates how *Ouran High School Host Club* (2002) engages with and challenges traditional gender norms within the *shoujo* manga genre, focusing on the trope of the cross-dressed heroine. By exploring how *Ouran* complicates gender representation through its female protagonist, Haruhi Fujioka—whose pragmatic view of gender disrupts conventional narrative tropes of female cross-dressing in *shoujo* manga—the study reveals how *Ouran* enriches the genre's portrayal of gender fluidity. Drawing on theories of gender-as-performance and the legacy of the Takarazuka Revue, the thesis examines how *shoujo* manga incorporates and transforms these theatrical influences over time. Using a qualitative approach, the research analyzes *Ouran*'s subversion of genre tropes, humor, and fluid gender displays to illuminate how the series moves beyond essentialist portrayals of masculinity and femininity. Through Haruhi's character, *Ouran* contests fixed gender identities and redefines the “gender-reveal” trope typically found in cross-dressing narratives, positioning the series as a key text in evolving *shoujo* manga's gender representation. By creating a heroine who transgresses the boundaries of gender through fluid cross-dressing and her relationships with others, *Ouran* pays homage to Takarazuka's influence. This legacy enriches the discourse on gender within *shoujo* manga, pushing the genre toward a broader and more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics.

Keywords: gender performance, *shoujo* manga, cross-dressing, Takarazuka Revue, *Ouran High School Host Club*

摘要



本論文探討了《櫻蘭高校男公關部》(2002)如何在少女漫畫類型中參與並挑戰傳統的性別規範、特別聚焦於女性角色的性別偽裝主題。透過分析主角藤岡春緋對性別的務實觀點、如何顛覆傳統少女漫畫中女性性別偽裝的敘述模式、這項研究揭示了《櫻蘭》如何豐富了此類型作品中性別流動的表現。借鑒「性別即表演」理論和寶塚歌劇團的影響、論文考察了少女漫畫如何在歷史進程中吸納並轉化這些戲劇性的元素。運用質性研究方法、本研究分析了《櫻蘭》如何藉由顛覆類型角色、幽默和流動的性別表現、超越了對陽剛與陰柔特質的本質主義詮釋。透過春緋的角色、《櫻蘭》挑戰了固定的性別身份、並重新定義了跨性別敘述中常見的「性別揭露」主題、確立了該作品在少女漫畫性別表現演變中的重要地位。藉由創造一位能跨越性別邊界的女主角並探索其流動性別偽裝及其與他人的關係、《櫻蘭》向寶塚影響致敬。這份遺產豐富了少女漫畫中的性別討論、推動此類型朝向更加廣泛和細緻的性別動態理解。

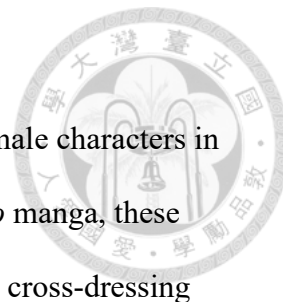
關鍵詞：性別表演、少女漫畫、性別偽裝、寶塚歌劇團、《櫻蘭高校男公關部》

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Glossary



bishounen. A Japanese term meaning “beautiful boy,” used to describe male characters in manga and anime who have androgynous or feminine features. In *shoujo* manga, these characters often serve as romantic interests, and their visual similarity to cross-dressing heroines highlights the fluidity of gender.

Boys’ Love (BL). A subgenre of Japanese media that focuses on romantic or sexual relationships between male characters. Often aimed at a female audience, BL is known for its exaggerated tropes and stylized relationships, which may not reflect realistic depictions of male/male relationships.

cross-dressing. The act of wearing clothes traditionally associated with the opposite gender. In *shoujo* manga, cross-dressing is often used as a narrative device to explore gender identity, blur gender boundaries, and create ambiguity in relationships.

fantasy. In the context of Takarazuka performances and *shoujo* manga, “fantasy” refers to a constructed, often exotic or Westernized, narrative setting that allows for the exploration of gender fluidity and identity without directly challenging societal norms.

female masculinity. A term used to describe the blend of masculine and feminine traits performed by women, particularly in Takarazuka Revue’s *otokoyaku*. This concept challenges traditional gender binaries and has been adopted in cross-dressed heroine manga.

fujoshi. A term used to refer to female fans of BL (Boys' Love) media. The label is often associated with women who enjoy stories about male/male romantic relationships, and in the context of *Ouran*, this fanbase influences the comedic portrayal of male homoeroticism.



gender essentialism. The belief that biological sex determines gender identity and that gender characteristics are naturally linked to one's biological sex. *Ouran* critiques this viewpoint, particularly in its portrayal of Haruhi, who resists essentialist definitions of gender.

gender performance¹. A concept that gender is something performed through behavior, clothing, and social interactions, rather than an inherent identity. This idea is central to the cross-dressing heroine genre and plays a major role in both Takarazuka and *shoujo* manga.

honnou. A term used in narratives to describe a character's instinctual awareness of the heroine's true biological sex, even when she is cross-dressing. This concept reassures characters of their heterosexuality after experiencing attraction to the cross-dressed heroine.

host club. A social entertainment venue in Japan where male hosts cater to female clients by engaging in conversation, providing drinks, and creating a relaxed and flirtatious atmosphere. In *Ouran High School Host Club*, the concept is parodied as the male students in the club offer a similar experience to their female schoolmates, acting out various romantic or idealized male personas to entertain them. The club's setting allows for playful exploration of gender roles and romantic archetypes, while also serving as a space where gender performance is central to the narrative.

¹ See "Methodology" on p. 12 for the specific usage of this term in this thesis.

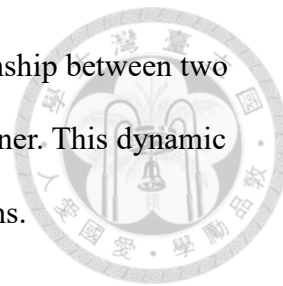
kei (役). A Japanese term meaning “type” or “style,” used in the context of *Ouran High School Host Club* to describe character archetypes. The members of the Host Club embody different “kei” such as the “prince” type or the “cool” type, which are exaggerated for comedic effect.

otokoyaku. Female performers in the *Takarazuka Revue* who play male roles. Their performances blend masculinity and femininity, creating what is referred to as “female masculinity.” This concept has influenced the portrayal of cross-dressing heroines in *shoujo* manga.

ryōsai kenbo (good wife, wise mother). A Confucian-inspired concept that became the ideal model for women during Japan’s Meiji Period, emphasizing women’s roles as wives and mothers.

S-Class: A term that originated in the early 20th century in Japan, referring to close, romantic but ostensibly platonic relationships between young women, particularly in the context of girls' schools. These relationships were often characterized by intense emotional bonds and admiration, typically seen as a phase of adolescence that would end with adulthood and heterosexual marriage. Commonly explored in *shoujo* manga, *S-Class* relationships are portrayed as pure, aligning with cultural ideals of chastity and non-threatening intimacy. This trope reflects historical gender norms while simultaneously allowing for the exploration of female same-gender affection within a socially acceptable framework.

***seme-uke* dynamic.** A common trope in BL narratives where the relationship between two male characters consists of a dominant (*seme*) and submissive (*uke*) partner. This dynamic is parodied in *Ouran* through the relationship between the Hitachiin twins.



shoujo². A Japanese term meaning “young girl” or “adolescent girl,” referring to manga targeted at a young female audience, often focused on themes of self-discovery, romance, and coming of age. Cross-dressing heroines and gender-related themes are common in this genre.

***sotsugyou* (graduation).** In *Takarazuka*, this term refers to a performer’s retirement from the stage, which often marks her transition from her public role to a traditional female role in society, like marriage. It parallels the conclusion of cross-dressing narratives in *shoujo* manga.

Takarazuka Revue. A Japanese all-female theater troupe founded in 1913, known for its gendered performances, where women play both male (*otokoyaku*) and female (*musumeyaku*) roles. The Revue has had a significant influence on *shoujo* manga, particularly in shaping gender performance and the cross-dressed heroine trope.

² For the sake of clarity, this term is used in italics (*shoujo*) when referring to the genre, and in quotation marks (“shoujo”) when referring to a girl between puberty and marriage.

Notes on Language



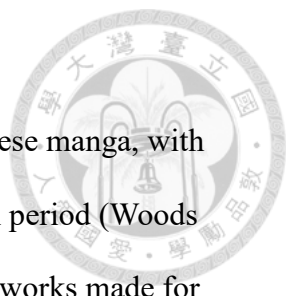
The main argument of this thesis necessitates the use of a variety of terms about gender. While I am aware of the long history of scholarly conversation regarding gender terminology in both gender studies and queer studies, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss or utilize such highly nuanced approaches. Therefore, my argument is based on definitions used in the two manga works and the specific scholarship on the cross-dressed heroine shoujo genre. I intentionally minimize the use of complex technical definitions, and model my use of gender-related terminology on the simplistic and outdated approach used by *Ouran* in the early 2000s. This enables me to discuss the manga in its specific genderframework as a product of Japanese pop-culture intended for the consumption of a nonscholarly audience (an audience commonly assumed to be made up of heterosexual women and girls), and additionally helps me avoid an anachronistic reading.

This thesis uses works written in Japanese, which necessitates the use of translated material. While I use official translations of *Ouran* and *Hana-Kimi*, I have found major translation issues, especially in the translation of gender and sexuality terminology. These mistranslations appear intended to make the material more easily accessible to Western audiences, but erase much of the gender ambiguity and queer undertones present in the original material. I have found Grey Micah's PhD thesis, *English Translations of Gender Nonconformity in Shōjo Manga and Anime: A Trans-Queer Materialist Feminist Analysis*, very helpful in tackling this subject, as it offers a detailed a study of (mis)translations of *Ouran* and *Hana-Kimi*. For example, the official translation of an important scene in *Ouran* where Haruhi explains her understanding and experience of gender “elided important nuances or forced a Western gender/sexual framework onto the characters,” and Haruhi's words “[had] been (seemingly) deliberately mistranslated in order to create a different

meaning in the target text” (Micah 259). In the end, for better accuracy, I have used my own translations of the two manga works for textual analysis where I found the official translation to be misleading. I have provided the original Japanese phrases whenever I used my own translations.

Another issue that comes out of translation is the matter of pronouns, since Japanese does not have gendered third-person pronouns such as “he” or “she.” Ultimately, I decided to use the pronouns used in the official translations, she/her for Haruhi, and he/him for Ryouji/Ranka, so that my own translations do not clash with the citations I directly borrow from the text. However, I do not claim that these attributed pronouns can override the gender ambiguities that these characters present; they are simply chosen for convenience.

Introduction



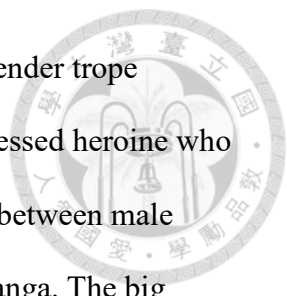
The cross-dressed heroine is an iconic figure in the history of Japanese manga, with roots in gender-play extending back to Japanese theater during the Heian period (Woods 13). In the history of Japanese *shoujo* manga (usually referring to comic works made for and marketed to young female audiences), female cross-dressers have been center-stage from the very start. The first-ever *shoujo* manga, Osamu Tezuka's *Ribon no Kishi* (*Princess Knight*) in 1953-6, features a cross-dressed heroine called Sapphire, inspired by the pantplayers of the all-female Takarazuka Revue (Fujimoto, "Transgender" 77-8; Saitou 92; Woods 15, Takeuchi 82). Cross-dressed heroines sustained their popularity in the later decades of *shoujo* manga, such as Riyoko Ikeda's *The Rose of Versailles* (published in Japan from 1972 to 1973, with sequels from 2013 to 2018; TV anime series broadcast in Japan between October 10, 1979 and September 3, 1980). Taking inspiration from the Takarazuka Revue, these early manga were set in foreign and exotic lands, effectively distancing the gender-play they depicted from a Japanese identity. This was followed by a new generation of works featuring Japanese heroines who cross-dressed in campus-settings.

Among these, the most renowned is probably Bisco Hatori's *Ouran Koukou Hosutobu* (*Ouran High School Host Club*, published in Japan between 2002 and 2010), which reached peak popularity in the early 2000s (Takeuchi 95). The cross-dressed heroine is a girl disguised as a boy, either out of necessity or for personal reasons, but significantly, *not* as an expression of gender identity. In these works, cross-dressing often serves as a tool which enables the heroine to enter a male-only setting, like the all-boys school or a male host club. Through her male disguise, the cross-dressed heroine performs "female masculinity," which is a specific kind of gender performance that has been inherited from Takarazuka Revue's pant-players. When it is adapted to the medium of *shoujo* manga, this

performance takes on new nuances, since the framework of masculinity in *shoujo* works such as *Ouran* have their unique dynamics regarding representation of femininity and masculinity. This spectrum of gender expression not only characterizes the cross-dressing *shoujo* manga, but also highlights these works' potential for creating spaces where girls and women can experiment with gender.

The primary text examined in this thesis is Bisco Hatori's *Ouran Koukou Hosuto-bu* (*Ouran High School Host Club*, 2002), published under Hakusensha and first serialized in the magazine *LaLa*. The series is licensed in English North America by Viz Media, a notable actor in the "watershed period" (Micah 207) between late 1990s and 2000s where anime and manga reached global markets more rapidly than ever. Set in the elite Ouran High School, the story follows Fujioka Haruhi, a scholarship student who comes from a lower middle class family. Through a series of events, she becomes indebted to the Host Club, a student club where the sons of high-profile families act as hosts to entertain (mostly female) students. Her short hair, thick glasses and disheveled outfit make the hosts assume Haruhi to be a boy, and she starts working as a host in order to pay her debt. Although the members find out about her sex, Haruhi states that she is not particularly attached to any gender, and will continue to act as a male host to pay back her debt. This gender nonconforming characterization is unique for a heroine, and it is explained partly by Haruhi's aloof personality, and partly by her queer father who is a professional crossdresser. *Ouran*'s characters, including Haruhi, are shaped by "its self-awareness and deliberate deployment of long-standing genre conventions" (Micah 207).

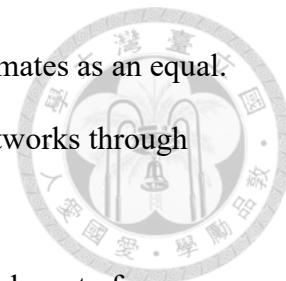
Such a playful and nuanced display of gender reminds one of an interesting counterpart in the 1990s, namely Hisaya Nakajo's *Hanazakari no Kimitachi-e* (To You in Full Bloom, 1996; hereinafter referred to as *Hana-Kimi*). For this thesis, I consider *Hana-*



Kimi an example of the conventional use of female cross-dressing as a gender trope prevalent in *shoujo* manga of its time. For instance, it features a cross-dressed heroine who struggles at performing masculinity, as well as homoerotic relationships between male students, who reflect character archetypes commonly found in *shoujo* manga. The big variety of tropes portrayed in *Hana-Kimi* makes it a useful work to contextualize *Ouran*'s comedic approach to genre conventions. *Hana-Kimi* is published under Hakusensha and first serialized in the magazine *Hana to Yume* from 1996 to 2004. It has had great success in domestic and global markets, with 17 million copies of the manga sold just in Japan (News S. California) and several volumes that made in bestseller lists in North America (Fruits Basket, Viz Takes Ownership); *Hana-Kimi* is the story of Mizuki Ashiya, who disguises herself as a boy to enroll in an all-boys' school to become close to Sano, an athlete she admires. The story follows Mizuki as she pursues Sano, first as a friend and soon romantically, and becomes closer with his classmates along the way. Her best friend, Nakatsu, soon becomes attracted to Mizuki, which leads to him questioning his sexuality.

Both *Ouran* and *Hana-Kimi* were exemplary of this genre in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Both works exemplify the common themes and motifs, such as the settings of female trespassing an all-male social group/community, the plot of friendship, affection, and romantic love developing between the cross-dressed heroine and her male counterparts, and, most importantly, the unique gender dynamics that emerge from cross-dressing in these designs. In both *Ouran* and *Hana-Kimi* the male disguise enables the cross-dressed heroines to enter a male space from which they would be barred as females, and more significantly, to move freely of the gender norms imposed upon them as girls. In *Ouran*, Haruhi works as a male host, which allows her to pay back her debt to the club. In *HanaKimi*, Mizuki enrolls in an all-boys' school to pursue the boy she is interested in, and

is able to participate in all aspects of the school life along with her classmates as an equal. Both heroines are granted entry into male spaces and the homosocial networks through crossdressing.

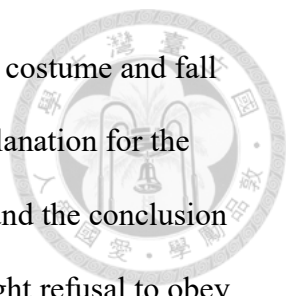


Despite both works' importance and significance in their time, I chose to focus extensively on *Ouran* for its heroine's ambiguous gender identity. Haruhi's lack of attachment to either a male or female gender-identity, I argue, sets a new textual foundation for discussions of gender as performance. It also problematizes some of the usual tropes such as the "gender reveal" ending, where the heroine, having won the affection of her love interest, sheds her masculine clothing and is restored to her "true" gender. Such elements make it necessary to re-evaluate *Ouran* by focusing on its discursive visual and dramatic narratives that challenge the conventions of gender roles in Japanese *shoujo* manga. While *Ouran* was published more than a decade ago, it marks the moment of the emergence of new possibilities in how gender was approached in *shoujo* manga narratives at that time. Hence I argue that the manga deserves more scholarly attention, regarding it as a milestone of characterization and plot design of female cross-dressing in *shoujo* manga between late 1990s and early 2000s. The examination of the nuances of gender-play in *Ouran* is likely to offer insight into the enduring themes in the *shoujo* genre, such as the journey of selfrealization and growth, complex character relationships that evade neat categorizations like platonic/romantic, subversion of gender norms and alternative gender expressions like cross-dressing, as well as comedic elements facilitating light-hearted satire of societal norms. Additionally it illuminates the turning point of *shoujo* manga's gradual evolution towards the medium of colorful gender-play it has evolved into, where "depictions of nonconforming or ambiguous gender/sexuality" (Micah 4) are abundant.

Literature Review

The abundance of cross-dressing in Japan's history shows that "gender as performance has long been an integral part of Japanese theater" (Welker 842). To be able to contextualize the cross-dressed heroine within this history, however, one needs to take a step back to meet her predecessor, the *otokoyaku*. The *otokoyaku*, a name given to the pantplayers of the all-female Takarazuka Revue that was founded in 1913, is the inspiration for the first-ever cross-dressed heroine, as well as *shoujo* manga as a whole. In his book *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (2011), Tamaki Saitou places this first heroine in "the "prehistoric age" in terms of the history of representation of "the beautiful fighting girl" (Saitou 89). This heroine is Osamu Tezuka's aforementioned character Sapphire, who marks the beginning of an "off-shoot rather than the mainstream of the beautiful fighting girl genre" (Saitou 92). This "off-shoot," as Saitou calls it, eventually developed into the female crossdressing genre with a life on its own.

Sapphire extensively appears within studies of the genre, especially as "from the mid-1990s onward, research about fighting heroines and girls who disguise themselves as men (known as *dansō*) became widespread" (Takeuchi 95). Regarding Sapphire's connection to *otokoyaku*, Yukari Fujimoto, whose work has been highly influential in the scholarship, puts hermaphroditism at the core of the genre, arguing that *shoujo* manga strips away the aspects of normative gender and its roles ("Transgender" 76). She also contends that in female cross-dressing, the male disguise is a refusal to grow up and accept her sexuality (79). In "Where Is My Place in the World? Early *Shoujo* Manga Portrayals of Lesbianism" (2014), Yukari Fujimoto further claims that transgressive gender-play of the heroines is driven by "girls' inability to experience positive affirmation and acceptance of their own sexuality as women" (34). In such narratives, this "positive affirmation" finally

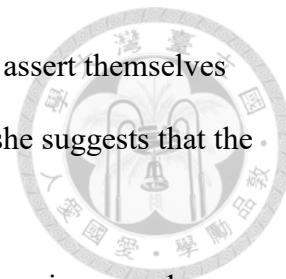


comes in the shape of a love-interest, as the heroines “remove their male costume and fall into the arms of the one they love” (34). This constitutes Fujimoto’s explanation for the common ending in this subgenre, the revealing of the heroine’s gender, and the conclusion of the romance plot-line. According to her, cross-dressing is not an outright refusal to obey female gender roles or accepting one’s female sexuality, but a postponement. Fujimoto’s theories appear aligned with some of the earliest *shoujo* critics such as Murakami Tomohiko, Hashimoto Osamu, Arikawa Yuu, Sekii Mitsuo, who all published works between 1979 and 1981 that attributed some form of gender escapism to the reading of *shoujo* works (Takeuchi 85-6).

However, this explanation of gender escapism too quickly dismisses the transformative potential that emerges during the limited time-frame where the heroine puts on her male disguise. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, I contend that the act of crossdressing opens up spaces for experimentation with gender. These spaces, I argue, serve as outlets for female desires that do not fit in with patriarchal gender ideologies.

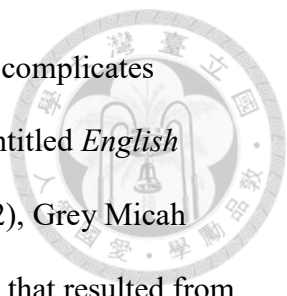
To expand on my claim, I refer to Marta Fanasca’s contrasting argument that gender ideologies are often adopted into the narratives of female cross-dressing manga. In her 2021 article, “When Girls Draw the Sword,” Fanasca comments on Fujimoto’s theories of gender ambiguity and complexity in *shoujo* manga. She draws attention to the portrayal of stereotypical girlhood as “representative of the lack of power and oppression” resulting from “patriarchal gender norms” (Fanasca 5). She warns against taking the cross-dressed heroine as “specifically standing for societal upheavals” and argues that since the 1950s, the function of the cross-dressed heroine has ranged from “being a representational tool aimed to sustain mainstream views on gender stereotypes to standing for women’s agency and alternative embodiments of femininity” (Fanasca 4). Ultimately, she contends that these

heroines are “bound to the possession of masculinity and male power to assert themselves and fulfill their goals” (Fanasca 4) and perhaps even more importantly, she suggests that the cross-dressed heroine “reaffirm[s] gender stereotypes” (Fanasca 5).

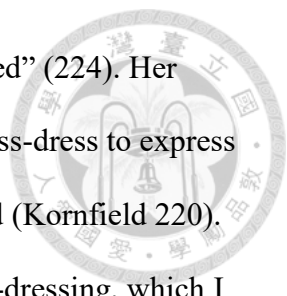


Although I agree with Fanasca that *shoujo* manga narratives often mirror gender stereotypes, thereby reenacting patriarchal gender ideologies, the assumption that masculinity and femininity within the context of *shoujo* manga are direct representations of “real” femininity or masculinity is misleading. The male disguise, made up of a series of gestures, language and clothes, does not represent “real” masculinity, but a specific performance of masculinity. This male disguise may indeed demonstrate the lack of power of stereotypical girlhood, but it is also this same disguise that goes on to prove that it is not the heroine who lacks the power. When she puts on a male disguise and becomes able to fulfill her goals, it is not the heroine that has changed, but the way the world treats her. This change does not suggest that her new-found ability to “assert [herself] and fulfill [her] goals” (Fanasca 4) is because she now possesses masculinity or male power; especially since these narratives are adamant on never letting the reader forget that the heroine is a girl, a point to be discussed in Chapter One. Rather, this change exposes the limitations imposed upon women and girls by the world based on their gender, which they are able to temporarily bypass using the male disguise.

As I have demonstrated, the scholarship surrounding the cross-dressed heroine in *shoujo* manga is both diverse and dynamic, offering varied interpretations and perspectives. Within this scholarship, *Ouran*, as a comedic twist on the cross-dressed heroine genre, has the potential to offer new perspectives and challenge norms. The manga differs from most other works in the genre on two main points: First, the romance plot only gains momentum towards the end of the series, and is not the motivation for the act of cross-dressing; second,



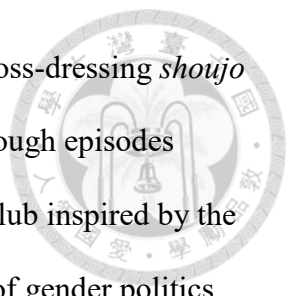
Haruhi is not particularly attached to any specific gender identity, which complicates theories such as Fujimoto's notion of postponement. In her PhD thesis entitled *English Translations of Gender Nonconformity in Shōjo Manga and Anime* (2022), Grey Micah defines *Ouran* as “epitomising, satirising, the postmodern shift in *shoujo* that resulted from commodification of character images as commodities in global markets,” which makes the machinations, i.e tropes, of *shoujo* manga explicit (216). This particular approach makes *Ouran* fertile ground to study gender dynamics, as it “simultaneously parod[ies] and indulge[s] the stereotypes that [define] shoujo in the 2000s” (218). Also focusing on *Ouran* as a parody of some mainstream *shoujo* manga, Sheena Marie Woods claims that *Ouran* “exemplifies all characteristics of gender bender *shoujo*” (25), suggesting that it has created “a new space to examine the idea of gender performativity in popular media and in reality” (14). Tania Darlington (2019) reads this new space as having subversive power that “impact[s] the mainstream one knowing smirk and wink at a time” (The Queering of Haruhi Fujioka). From Micah, Woods and Darlington's works, we can see that recent studies on *Ouran* have emphasized the new possibilities it creates in understanding gender as performance within the context of *shoujo* manga. Darlington claims that, as a work of parody, *Ouran*'s “engagement with ... fundamentally disruptive traditions [of fan culture and cross-dressing] suggests a subtle undermining of Japanese patriarchal and heteronormative traditions” (The Queering of Haruhi Fujioka). Darlington's and Woods' claims that narratives of female cross-dressing in *shoujo* manga have subversive power seem to clash with Fujimoto's and Fanasca's views, as Fujimoto sees these narratives as a postponed obedience to gender roles, while Fanasca regards them as the reaffirmation of these roles. Within this selection of analyses, it may help to move back to Sarah Kornfield's earlier study, which occupies the middle-ground with the claim that in these manga “even



while gender norms are transcended, gender identity is strongly reinforced” (224). Her analysis of *Ouran* and *Hana-Kimi* concludes that the heroines do not cross-dress to express a true gender identity, or “transgenderism,” but to achieve a practical end (Kornfield 220). She uses the term “utilitarian cross-dressing” to define this kind of cross-dressing, which I will elaborate on in Chapter Two. Although this particular term is coined by Kornfield, the act of cross-dressing that is motivated by practical reasons is a trope in the genre that has been noted before by scholars such as Fujimoto and Fanasca (Fujimoto, “Transgender” 79; Fanasca 7).

Although Kornfield categorizes her under utilitarian cross-dressers, Haruhi does not completely fit into the definition of a utilitarian cross-dresser. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, Haruhi’s nonbinary gender identity challenges the idea that in *shoujo* manga, whatever “play” one might engage in, the only path is to eventually settle into expected gender roles. I found Woods’ work particularly useful in looking at this type of “play,” as she analyzes gender performance in the history of Japanese theater with a focus on crossdressing. Japanese theater and the *shoujo* manga have been in conversation throughout their development, and the conventions of theater, like cross-dressing, are reflected as tropes in manga (Woods 57).

As mentioned before, the Takarazuka Revue is elemental in the history of female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga. Jennifer Robertson’s famous 1998 book *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, along with “Female Masculinity and Fantasy Spaces: Transcending Genders in the Takarazuka Theatre and Japanese Popular Culture” (2005) by Karen Nakamura and Hisako Matsuo, and *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan’s Takarazuka Revue* (2008) by Leonie R. Stickland, have informed my writing in terms of gender performance in Takarazuka, especially in



Chapter One, where I trace the roots of gender performance in female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga back to Takarazuka. *Ouran* references this Takarazuka legacy through episodes centered around cross-dressing and the “Zuka Club,” a fictional school club inspired by the Revue. Exploring the connections between these manga and the history of gender politics surrounding Takarazuka directs us to the complex dynamics that lie beneath the surface of female cross-dressing as entertainment. As part of pop-culture, neither Takarazuka nor the female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga genre are explicitly intended as political commentary on gender, and often reproduce patriarchal sentiments about the role of girls and women in society through narratives that conclude with the abandonment of the male disguise, and heterosexual romances. However, both *shoujo* manga and Takarazuka have vast and rich fan cultures surrounding them, cultures that are predominantly female. Both the *otokoyaku* and the cross-dressed heroine are women and girls who perform masculinity for other women and girls. Through the cracks of the patriarchal discourse encasing female crossdressing narratives, we can catch glimpses of the real mechanisms that are fueled by female desires. In doing so, we can witness how these narratives blur the boundaries of gender and performance through cross-dressing, and offer insight into how girls and women navigate patriarchal gender ideologies and find spaces of self-expression within them.

Ouran’s references to Takarazuka’s legacy underscores the historical connection between gender performance in *shoujo* manga and the cultural significance of crossdressing. Like Takarazuka, while *Ouran* may not explicitly aim to comment on gender politics, it still participates in the broader conversation surrounding gender roles and performance. Although cross-dressing in *Ouran* is not meant to challenge patriarchal gender structures overtly, the depiction of gender offers a space where the performance of

masculinity by a female character can blur traditional gender boundaries. These performances are primarily for female audiences, reflecting deeper female desires and providing a site of gender exploration that, while framed within patriarchal structures, also allows for moments of subversion and reinterpretation of gender norms. Through its playful use of gender performance, *Ouran* makes explicit the complex interplay of entertainment, gender roles, and the search for self-expression in a patriarchal society.

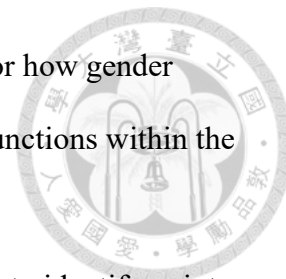
Research Question and Thesis Argument

The research question of this thesis seeks to explore how *Ouran High School Host Club* engages with and subverts traditional gender norms within the *shoujo* manga genre, particularly focusing on the trope of the cross-dressed heroine. By examining *Ouran*'s heroine, Haruhi Fujioka, the thesis investigates how her fluid gender performance deviates from the essentialist portrayals common in earlier works like *Hanazakari no Kimitachi-e*. Specifically, the research aims to analyze how *Ouran* uses parody and gender performance to challenge established norms of femininity and masculinity. Additionally, the thesis contextualizes this within the historical legacy of Takarazuka Revue, tracing the ways in which gender performance in manga is influenced by this all-female theater. Through detailed textual analysis, the study addresses the broader implications of gender fluidity and performance in Japanese popular culture.

Methodology

This thesis will analyze *Ouran* as a marker of transformation within the cross-dressed heroine *shoujo* manga. To test this claim, I will first contextualize *Ouran* by exploring its ties to cross-dressing in Japanese theater, specifically through the Takarazuka inheritance of gender performance and female masculinity. This section on historical and cultural

backgrounds is further intended to provide the appropriate framework for how gender functions in Japanese culture, and even more specifically, how gender functions within the context of female cross-dressing Japanese media.



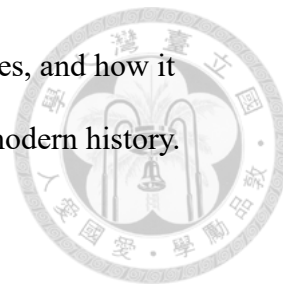
Subsequently, I will analyze *Ouran*'s engagement with these tropes to identify points of non/conformity. To this end, I will do close textual analysis on two levels: the heroine's gender identity, and interpersonal relationships. To further support my analysis of *Ouran*, I will use *Hana-kimi* as a secondary text to draw comparative insights from. The comparison of the two works' approaches to common tropes is intended to provide a better understanding of Haruhi's unique standing in the evolution of the cross-dressed heroine archetype. My close reading will focus on the narrative structure, character development and relationships between characters, as well as related supporting actors, to observe how gender operates within the framework of narrative conventions.

During the research process for this thesis, I have consulted Western theories of gender and sexuality, though the analysis ultimately focuses on the cultural background specific to the study. This research has shaped my use of the term "performance," which holds a significant place in gender studies. While not directly borrowed from a specific academic work, the term "performance" as employed in this thesis draws from a range of Western gender theories. The concept of "performativity" originates in linguistics, first defined by British philosopher of language J. L. Austin. Erving Goffman further developed the idea in the chapter "Gender Display" from his book *Gender Advertisements* (1979), where he argued that humans assume an "essential nature," interpretable through "natural signs given off or expressed by them." The notion of performativity was later extended to gender studies by Candace West and Don Zimmerman in their influential article "Doing Gender," published in *Gender and Society* in 1987. Building on Goffman's social

psychological approach in “Gender Display,” West and Zimmerman theorized that gender is an active process, something individuals “do,” involving two key components: gender performance and accountability. Judith Butler popularized the concept of gender performativity with their seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) and further expanded on it in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004).

My thesis was also informed by numerous works that engage with theoretical frameworks by Western scholars. For example, James Welker’s “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent” applies a Freudian approach to Boys’ Love (BL) manga, and Tamaki Saitou’s *Beautiful Fighting Girl* draws heavily on Lacanian psychoanalysis. Additionally, Setsu Shigematsu’s “Dimensions of Desire” integrates Butlerian, Freudian, and Kleinian theories. These scholars have provided invaluable insights into gender and sexuality in Japanese media through the lens of Western theoretical models. However, I have deliberately chosen not to employ any specific Western theory in my analysis for two primary reasons. First, my source material—*shoujo* manga and its engagement with gender and cross-dressing—demands a more nuanced understanding that is closely tied to Japan’s own historical and cultural frameworks. By focusing on historically tracking the narrative tropes found in *shoujo* manga, particularly those influenced by the Takarazuka Revue and Japan’s complex gender history, my research seeks to contextualize these works within their specific socio-cultural environment, rather than fitting them into externally imposed theoretical structures. Second, rather than subsuming my analysis under a Western theoretical paradigm, I aim to provide an analysis that highlights the unique embodiments of gender norms and performances in Japan, especially as they are articulated through the mediums of Takarazuka and *shoujo* manga. This approach allows for a deeper, more culturally specific

understanding of how gender-as-performance functions in these narratives, and how it reflects the broader cultural background of the Meiji Period in Japan's modern history.



Limitations

I choose to limit my focus on female cross-dressing manga for this thesis, as it has a special place among other works due to its strong ties to Takarazuka and cross-dressing as gender performance. One notable attribute in this genre is that the physical, sexed body is largely excluded from discussions of gender, allowing an exploration of themes of gender in *shoujo* manga that is focused on the performance itself. With that said, it should be noted that there are many works in the *shoujo* genre that explore gender through the physical body, specifically through intersex and transgender characters, works which would contribute another important perspective to the study of gender-play in *shoujo* manga.

Claudine (1978) by Riyoko Ikeda (also the author of *The Rose of Versailles*), *The Sword of Peros* (1986-1987) by Kaoru Kurimoto, *After School Nightmare* (2004-2007) by Setona Mizushiro, *Wandering Son* (2002-2013) by Takako Shimura are all examples of *shoujo* works that center around themes of gender through intersex or transgender characters, that have been published either before or around the same time as *Ouran*. Additionally, there are many works that do not center around themes of gender where non-cisgender characters can be found. Furthermore, Boys' Love as a genre shares many gender dynamics with female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga. It has been theorized by critics like James Welker that the beautiful boys of this genre are projections of the female reader to escape the social limitations of gender roles. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into gender-play all across the *shoujo* genre, but it is my hope that this study will contribute to the effort.



Chapter Outline

Introduction

The opening chapter introduces the primary texts while providing brief insight into the historical context of the genre, as well as providing a literature review on cross-dressing *shoujo* manga and its heroines. Following this, the research questions and central thesis are established for subsequent analysis. A brief explanation of the chosen methodology and chapter structure follow. Finally, the significance and potential contribution of this thesis to the academic field is established.

Chapter One

In the first chapter of this thesis, the historical context of the cross-dressed heroine is discussed. After a brief overview of the wider cross-dressing culture in pre-Meiji Japan, the way that post-war gender ideologies of the Japanese government shaped the female cross-dressers in theater and *shoujo* manga are demonstrated. Then, an exploration of the history of gender performance in Takarazuka is provided to demonstrate the *otokoyaku*'s influence on female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga. This chapter is intended to provide the necessary background information for the textual analysis in the later chapters by explaining the historical and cultural roots of the gender performance of the cross-dressed heroine.

Chapter Two

This chapter focuses on the cross-dressed heroine of *Ouran*, utilizing *Hana-Kimi* as a supplementary reading to elucidate *Ouran*'s subversion of the usual tropes found in

female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga. Through detailed textual analysis, this chapter identifies the patterns of gender construction in the heroine's characterization, focusing on how the narrative voice navigates the ambiguity born from the gap between the heroine's female gender and her male disguise. Through comparative textual analysis, I demonstrate how Haruhi's nonbinary identity marks a departure from the essentialist narrative tendency of centering the heroine's female sex as her gender identity, whereas her male disguise is a temporary gender performance separate from her "real" self.

I discuss the role of *Ouran*'s comedic approach in terms of the challenges it is able to pose through the characterization of Haruhi to the tropes common in female crossdressing manga narratives. This approach allows *Ouran* to create ambivalence and ambiguity around gender, and demonstrates that comedy "can be intended and read merely as comical and playful, *and* as demystifying and subversive" (Robertson 40). As the most significant example of such engagements, I discuss the trope in cross-dressing media of the "gender-reveal" ending, where the heroine's female gender-identity is revealed, and the story is concluded in heterosexual romance. This common ending usually acts as a resolution and restoration of order in regards to gender, by erasing ambiguous gender and sexualities born from the heroines' cross-dressing. I elaborate on the ways in which this common ending reflects societal expectations around cross-dressing girls and women such as the *otokoyaku* and the cross-dressed heroine, as well as how this affects the potential subversive power of these works. Moving forward, I analyze how this same ending is enacted in *Ouran*, and explore the way this trope is subverted to let Haruhi abandon her male disguise and have a romantic relationship without centering these events as the pinnacle of her character growth.

Chapter Three

In this chapter, the focus shifts from the heroine to the male love interests for an analysis of interpersonal relationships as they are influenced by the cross-dressing of the heroine. This chapter finds that while there is a lot of freedom granted to the heroine in regards to gender-play, once her male disguise creates queer implications in her relationship with male characters, the narrative uses strategies such as exposing of the heroine's female-sexed body, or the threat of sexual assault, to forcefully reestablish heteronormativity. This further demonstrates the adaptation of patriarchal ideologies surrounding Takarazuka's *otokoyaku* into the *shoujo* genre, where any threat to hierarchical gender norms by cross-dressing is dealt with arguments of gender essentialism, and the so-called vulnerability of the female body. My textual analysis shows that *Ouran*'s engagement with these strategies is able to challenge them, at least to a certain extent. The fact that Haruhi is not disempowered when faced with threats of sexual and physical violence supports my claim that she marks a moment of departure from the patriarchal and heteronormative overtones for the genre.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis by highlighting the significant role *Ouran* plays in redefining gender norms in *shoujo* manga, focusing on its departure from traditional crossdressing tropes and essentialist views. It emphasizes how the series uses Haruhi's fluid gender expression to challenge conventional portrayals and disrupt established gender roles. The chapter explores how *Ouran* utilizes humor and parody to critique patriarchal structures, broadening the representation of gender in the genre. By connecting these themes to the influence of the Takarazuka Revue, the analysis situates *Ouran* within a broader cultural and social background regarding gender-as-performance. The conclusion

also suggests directions for future research, advocating for expanded studies on manga that challenge gender binaries and incorporating global perspectives.

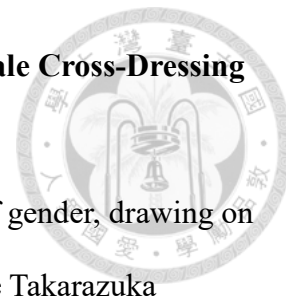


Significance of the Project

This project makes a valuable contribution to the study of gender in *shoujo* manga by examining how *Ouran High School Host Club* challenges the conventions around gender with its portrayal of a heroine who does not conform to fixed gender expectations. By analyzing the series in the context of the Takarazuka Revue's influence on gender performance in Japanese culture, the study sheds light on how *shoujo* manga has adapted to explore more flexible expressions of gender. The research reveals how *Ouran* subverts familiar tropes, such as the “gender-reveal” and conventional portrayals of masculinity and femininity, offering new alternatives to the heroine's journey. In this way, the project adds depth to the discussion of gender-as-performance in cross-dressing *shoujo* manga, expanding the understanding of how gender is represented and explored in Japanese media. This work contributes to the mapping of the genre's past, enabling future studies to further investigate changing gender expressions in manga and their cultural implications.

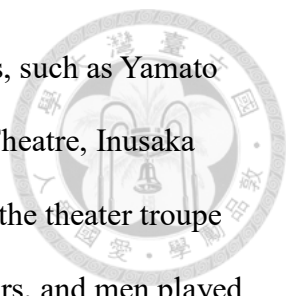


Chapter One: Historical Context of Gender Performance and Female Cross-Dressing in Japan



Ouran High School Host Club presents a nuanced exploration of gender, drawing on Japan's historical gendered theatricality, particularly the influence of the Takarazuka Revue. The series is significant for its subversive approach to traditional gender portrayals, using cross-dressing and gender performance as central themes. In this chapter, I examine how *Ouran* reflects and challenges the historical frameworks of gender performance rooted in Takarazuka, offering essential context for the textual analysis that follows. This begins with an exploration of the Takarazuka Revue's role in shaping the female cross-dressing conventions in *shoujo* manga by tracing the origins of the genre, focusing on the historical and cultural conditions of Japan's Meiji Period and the influence of Westernization on gender and sexuality. I introduce key aspects of Takarazuka, including storylines, settings, and gender performance, which are later adapted into female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga. Then, I delve deeper into *shoujo* manga tropes like female masculinity, costumes, and heterosexual romance that echo Takarazuka's legacy. This discussion positions Takarazuka as foundational to the cross-dressed heroine's evolution in *shoujo* manga, underscoring the genre's ongoing engagement with gender play. While a full genealogy of the cross-dressed heroine lies beyond this study, my analysis here provides a broader framework, where I claim *Ouran*'s Haruhi represents a significant shift in challenging essentialist views of gender performance.

Gender as performance, especially in the form of cross-dressing, has an important place in Japan's history of performance art (Woods 70). According to Jennifer Robertson, performances of cross-dressing "characterized ritual practices ... and the Noh theater, have lent spice to many novels, and have even figured in the eighth-century mytho-histories"



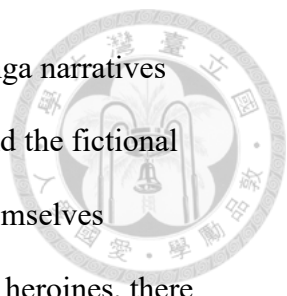
(51). Earliest examples of cross-dressers are male characters from stories, such as Yamato Takeru from *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters), Benten from Kabuki Theatre, Inusaka Kendo from *Nansu Satomi Hakkenden* (The Story of Eight *Samurai*). In the theater troupe that founded Kabuki, *Izumo-no Okuni*, women would play male characters, and men played female characters. After women were banned from performing on-stage in 1629, male actors started specializing in women roles, which was called *onnagata*, “the way of women” (my trans.). As the name suggests, these men were expected to embody womanhood, and encouraged to live as women off-stage. During summer festivals in the Edo Period (1603-1868), *Geisha*, professional female entertainers, would perform dances and skits dressed as men in the pleasure quarter of the city. There were also customs of gender-bending in Kabuki plays, where male characters would be switched to female, and “parody pictures,” where painters would switch the gender or historical and fictional characters (Cross-dressers in Ukiyo).

This limited selection of cross-dressers point to a larger pattern in Japan’s history of gender-play. Whereas male cross-dressing was socially acceptable, such as the case of the *onnagata* who was celebrated as the ideal of feminine beauty on and off-stage, women were banned from the stage, and female cross-dressing was criminalized (Robertson 52). The Meiji Restoration of 1868 put an end to gender-crossing as entertainment. While previously femininity and masculinity were not limited to specific genders, the Meiji Civil Code formally normalized heterosexuality, adopting a Western framework of gender and sexuality as part of its modernization process (Micah 61). Androgynous figures such as the *onnagata* were a threat to the new order, because their existence “recogniz[ed] that sex and gender were not naturally aligned in any one body” which conflicted with the state’s efforts to “[delineate] sex and gender” in a way that eliminated “gender ambivalence,” which was

“associated with social disorder” (Robertson 55). Japanese men were to be dressed in Western-style clothing and keep their hair short. Meanwhile, Japanese women would keep wearing the traditional Japanese *kimono* and hair-styles. The Western-style clothes symbolized modernity and power; meaning that any Japanese woman wearing such clothes was making an illegitimate claim to this power, becoming masculinized and straying away from tradition.

The demonization of Japanese women wearing Western clothing during the Meiji Period parallels the criminalization of female cross-dressing in pre-Meiji laws. Both instances show patriarchal anxieties about women using clothes to perform masculinity in order to gain access to parts of social life that were exclusive to men, transgressing boundaries drawn by patriarchal state ideologies. “[G]irls and women almost exclusively were singled out as the sources of sexual deviance and social disorder” (Robertson 56), and were particularly “targeted by gender/sex-specific educational agendas in response to the threat of nonconformity from this model [of dichotomous gendered citizenship roles]” (Micah 61).

In the 1890s, the Japanese government assigned the model of femininity as *ryōsai kenbo* (“Good Wife, Wise Mother”) with the Meiji Civil Code (Robertson 62). A married woman’s social obligation thus became “to shoulder the responsibility for running the household and raising children” (Stickland, “Introduction”). As for the period between puberty and marriage, marking the moment of reaching womanhood and sexual maturity, the term “shoujo” was used. A public discourse surrounding the experiences of “shoujo” developed out of this official codification over the next few decades, culminating in the emergence of *shoujo* manga during the 1950s. In these texts, not only were the protagonists “shoujo” themselves, the stories were almost exclusively about self-discovery and growth,



a journey which was concluded with a heterosexual romance. These manga narratives clearly reflected the social expectations around girl- and womanhood, and the fictional journey of the heroine served as a model for the target audience, who themselves were “shoujo”. In *shoujo* works that were centered around cross-dressing heroines, there were additional steps to ensure that the masculine gender performance was framed as a part of the heroine’s journey towards womanhood, and would be completely abandoned at the moment of initiation into womanhood at the end of the story. For this purpose, crossdressing was framed not as self-expression but a useful disguise that was completely separate from the heroine’s gender. The transitory nature of cross-dressing was communicated to the reader through moments of failure in the heroine’s performance of masculinity, and the eventual resolution of a heterosexual relationship. This particular framing of cross-dressing made it compatible with the gender ideologies that originated during the Meiji period, and was inherited directly from the Takarazuka Revue.

The model for said framing can be seen in the discourse around Takarazuka, where the young and unmarried female performers were called “students” (“seitou”; my trans.), which underlined their “shoujo” status. The performers’ time in the Revue was described by the founder as “a brief interlude between childhood... and respectable married life and motherhood” (Stickland, “Introduction”), an interlude which furthermore served to prepare the student for marriage (Roberston 65). Over time, the term “shoujo” came to have associations of various types of female homosexuality, some of which were non-sexual and “tolerated as a passing phase” (Welker 842) among young girls, and some of which were threatening to social order and thus labeled as sexual deviancy. Takarazuka’s *otokoyaku*, performing as charming men for their swarms of avid female fans, were often associated

with the sexually deviant category of “shoujo,” the binary opposite of *ryōsai kenbo* (Robertson 66).

The *otokoyaku* performed on a stage that constituted a fantasy setting where elements of performance that might be subversive in daily life found a place to be displayed and celebrated, while simultaneously being contained from threatening the social order of everyday life. In the pages that follow, I will explore how this use of fantasy settings to contain threats of transgression is consistent throughout the development of female crossdressing *shoujo* manga narratives out of Takarazuka plays. In a Takarazuka context, these fantasy settings were simply there as another level of entertainment: charming “other world[s]” (Stickland, “Introduction”) that could be enjoyed by the audience, most of whom were married, middle-aged women (Nakamura 134). For the Takarazuka fans, these exotic worlds were also a “respite from a boring, unpleasant or unfulfilling everyday existence as a female in Japanese society (Stickland, “Introduction”), serving as escapism.

However, the inner mechanisms of the fantasy settings were deeply concerned with identity politics. Many of these fantasy settings were fashioned after “the West” which was imagined to be a queer space (Robertson 76, Welker 842). The Western-style costumes of the *otokoyaku* were not only used to represent an ideal masculinity (Woods 59), but also to establish the setting as “the West,” where these foreign characters acted as “foils against which a homogeneous Japaneseness [could] be gauged and understood” (Robertson 77). The created distance from a Japanese identity allowed for staging female performances of masculinity, safely contained by the fantasy settings “where sex and gender do not necessarily coincide” (Stickland, Chapter 5). Specifically for the *otokoyaku*, these settings established the Takarazuka stage as an “ambivalent public space for the performance of masculinity by females” (Robertson 58) that had no claim to a “connection with reality”

(Nakamura 152), where performers and fans had “a bracketed experience that [they could] go to and return from” (Nakamura 151).

In other words, the use of the West as a fantasy setting in *Takarazuka* performances served as a strategic device to explore gender and sexuality within a safe, distanced context. By positioning the West as a site of transvestism in Japanese popular culture, *Takarazuka* created a space where traditional gender norms could be subverted without threatening Japanese identity. The Western-style costumes worn by the *otokoyaku* became symbols of idealized masculinity, but within a context that was foreign and removed from Japan. This othering of the West allowed the performances to explore fluidity between sex and gender, as the distance from Japanese cultural expectations permitted a temporary suspension of rigid gender binaries. The performances, therefore, were not viewed as challenging Japanese norms directly, but as part of a fantasy where gender roles can be performed and reimagined without lasting consequences. This dynamic allowed for the exploration of gender ambiguity and the performance of masculinity by women, but only within the carefully constructed boundary of the exotic Western setting. As a result, the imagined West became a safe container for transgressive ideas, allowing Japan to maintain a sense of homogeneity and tradition while still engaging with gender performance.

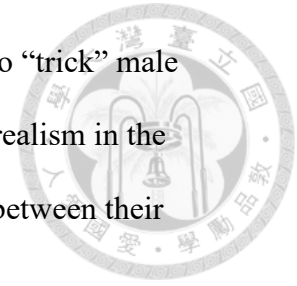
The fantasy setting thus played an important part in creating this space where gender subversion could be performed as entertainment—that is, in a way that did not obviously threaten the status quo. For, by training female performers to become *musumeyaku*³ (“daughter role”; my trans.) and *otokoyaku*, the Takarazuka Revue did inescapably take part in “orchestrating the construction and regulation of gender” by

³*musumeyaku*: Female performers in the Takarazuka Revue who play traditional female roles, in contrast to the *otokoyaku*. These roles emphasize traditional femininity within the theatrical framework.

“literally staging the enactment of gender roles in society” (Robertson 62). There was an awareness that this could potentially create tensions between the Revue and nationalist ideologies based on strict gender roles, if performances of gender subversion moved beyond pure entertainment to an implicit critique of gender essentialist and, by extension, nationalist ideologies. In order to counter such potential accusations, the Revue’s official position was that all onstage performances of gender, whether feminine or masculine, ultimately served the same purpose: teaching the “female” gender to female performers to make them into *ryōsai kenbo* (Robertson 84). In theory, the *otokoyaku*’s performance of masculinity was strictly limited to the stage, with the directors of the Revue making sure to emphasize that, off-stage, *otokoyaku* were ordinary women.

One way for the Revue to regulate gender as performance was to make sure *otokoyaku*’s performance of masculinity nevertheless foregrounded the performer’s female sex, creating a ‘female masculinity’. In direct contrast with the *onnagata* - a man who had completely transformed into the ideal woman and performed this role in all areas of life - the *otokoyaku* could only perform her masculinity as a role in a play, wherein “her body served as the main representation and enactment of the ideal man” through the intentional display of “markers of masculinity” (Robertson 59) such as clothes, hair-style or masculine language. The *otokoyaku*’s performance did not aim to replicate real-life masculinity; in fact, the male directors of the Revue were against the *otokoyaku* being “too successful in their appropriation and performance of masculinity” (Robertson 78). Incorporating feminine elements into the performance of masculinity called “attention to the facticity of [the *otokoyaku*’s] female bodies and, *from the standpoint of convention*, to the primacy of their femininity, thus ensuring that their secondary, “male” gender was kept in check by their primary, ‘female’ gender” (Robertson 78). This was intended to shield the *otokoyaku*

from the patriarchal moral panic about ordinary women cross-dressing to “trick” male employers to get hired. Like the fantasy setting, this intentional lack of realism in the *otokoyaku*’s portrayal of gender was supposed to create a safe distance between their performances and the heteronormative, patriarchal Japanese identity.



Despite the intentions, however, the *otokoyaku* gained “female fans of all ages, class, and educational backgrounds” who “appreciate[d] a female body performing in a capacity that transgresses the boundaries of received femininity and masculinity” rather than a “prototypical man” (Robertson 82). The Takarazuka Revue and *otokoyaku* were denounced as encouragers of cross-dressing in broader society and deviant homosexuality among women (Robertson 62, 70). This backlash showed that both government censors and the public recognized the subversive queer potential of the Revue, despite the founder’s efforts to market Takarazuka as harmless, escapist entertainment.

As discussed, the *otokoyaku*’s imperfect imitation of masculinity was initially intended to prevent the subversion of gender norms by infusing the performance of masculinity with femininity. However, it was precisely the result of this fusion, that is, the feminine masculinity of the *otokoyaku*, that ended up being so attractive to the female audience. The *otokoyaku* served as pivotal figures who bridged the gap between the fantasy of the stage and the real world, offering audiences a temporary escape from traditional roles like that of the *ryōsai kenbo*. They embodied a distinct gender identity in their performances that was neither entirely male nor female, but rather of women very obviously portraying male characters, thus carving out a unique space in the spectrum of gender expression (Robertson 86). Although Takarazuka productions were intended as wholesome family entertainment with ideological safeguards against potential subversive

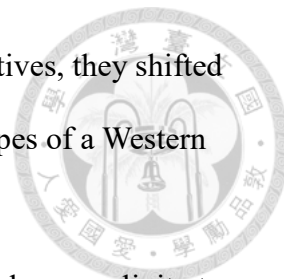
implications, “fans and performers...read their own transgressive meanings into the performances” (Welker 847).

The influence of Takarazuka in the cross-dressed heroine *shoujo* genre goes beyond the male disguise of the heroine. These manga have also inherited several of the ambiguous dynamics attached to Takarazuka’s explicit performance of gender in the form of tropes. In this section, I will discuss Takarazuka’s influence on the genre in four key tropes: fantasy setting, female masculinity, the male disguise, and the heterosexual romance ending.

As with Takarazuka, much of cross-dressed heroine manga, especially that published before the 1990s, utilizes “the West” as a fantasy setting. This method once again distanced the story away from Japan, effectively “creat[ing] a free “other world” for artists and readers to explore sexuality and identity” (Ogi 77). Like the female fans of Takarazuka, female readers were able to “expand their imaginations and experiment with settings far from their personal realities” (Ogi 88) where they were closely confined to nationalistic gender norms like *ryōsai kenbo*.

The two prominent works mentioned in the Introduction chapter, *Princess Knight* and *The Rose of Versailles*, both used the “West” as the setting to narratives that were heavily charged with questions about gender. The “foreign” nature of the setting and characters created a safe distance for the female reader, who was able to indulge in cross-dressing narratives without any direct threat to her own gender or sexual identity. In later works, the fantasy setting of the “West” at large gave way to school campuses located in Japan. These campuses themselves were symbols of Japan’s experience of Westernization, as Japan’s boarding school system was established as part of the reforms made to the education system. Among other things, their introduction engendered a relocation of young peoples’ education and socialization from the household to the school campus. As the

campus became the most popular setting for cross-dressed heroine narratives, they shifted to more definitely Japanese locations while retaining the main visual tropes of a Western setting, like school buildings and uniforms.



Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the appeal of *otokoyaku*'s female masculinity to female audiences as its representation of gender subversive possibilities in an otherwise stiflingly patriarchal environment. This female masculinity relates to the male masculine gender norm *bishounen*, or "beautiful boys," in the broader *shoujo* manga genre. *Bishounen* were not only the preferred type for the male cast in the cross-dressed heroine works, but continue to play the role of male romantic interest to the cross-dressed heroine in the vast majority of *shoujo* manga. *Bishounen* are "visually and physically neither male nor female" (Welker 842), and hence mirror the female masculinity of the *otokoyaku*. This similarity is no coincidence: it is precisely because of this shared ancestry in the *otokoyaku* that the *bishounen* and cross-dressed heroine resemble one another. Like the *otokoyaku*, the *bishounen* "embodies the borrowing and bending of the "West" to create spaces in which to explore gender and sexuality" (Welker 846). Within the medium of manga, "[t]he most significant difference between [the cross-dressed heroine and the *bishounen*] is narrative rather than visual" (Welker 848), meaning that the reader has to rely on the narrative to tell them whether this figure is a *bishounen* or a girl in boy's clothing. The fact that the visually androgynous but biologically male *bishounen* is the ultimate masculine gender norm in manga creates a unique gender framework, as it erases perceived differences between sexes. When the *otokoyaku* would infuse her performance of masculinity with femininity, it was to prevent the performance from mimicking reality too closely: The femininity deliberately infused into the masculine role would expose the *otokoyaku*'s act of crossdressing as performance, separating it from the supposedly depraved acts of cross-

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dressing in daily life. However, this mechanic failed to make such differentiations within the gender framework of *shoujo* manga, since the cross-dressed heroine visually appeared the same as the male *bishounen*. The heroine was therefore able to retain the female masculinity that was appealing to female audiences, while nevertheless using her male disguise to gain access to spaces that were male-exclusive, such as the all-male boarding school, or the host club, which was the sort of act that was condemned by the patriarchal gender ideologies.

The fact that the heroine was able to successfully perform masculinity, at least visually, represented the potential of cross-dressing to subvert essentialist portrayals of gender. The tensions created between the masculine attire and the female body it disguised suggested that “clothing [was] a means to, and even the substance of, the character’s commutable gender” (Robertson 74). A performance of gender which could be achieved through clothing, voice and gesture suggested that femininity and masculinity could be successfully communicated through the display of certain gender-coded traits, with no regard to the performer’s sex. Gender, when performed in this way, had the potential to challenge “the ideological fixity of received gender differences” (Robertson 74) as well as the “essentialism of conventional femininity and masculinity” (Robertson 87).

Both Takarazuka and cross-dressing heroines in manga, particularly in earlier works such as *Hana-Kimi*, were ideologically framed to reinforce conventional gender roles. It emphasizes that performances of masculinity, while central to the plot, were presented as temporary disguises that would eventually be discarded, with the heroines ultimately conforming to heteronormative expectations and traditional female roles through marriage or romantic fulfillment, as with the *otokoyaku*. As discussed, Takarazuka Revue’s founder sought to prevent such potential by emphasizing that the *otokoyaku* were simple, ordinary

women that naturally conformed to conventional gender roles when they were off-stage. Similarly, the cross-dressed heroines in manga were often characterized as ordinary girls who put on the male disguise as a means-to-an-end, or out of necessity. This image of an otherwise ordinary girl temporarily putting on a male disguise was often enforced through moments of failure in their performance of masculinity (such as failing to use male firstperson pronouns) that reminded the reader that the heroine was simply playing a role and nothing more. Another narrative strategy that could not be used with the *otokoyaku*, but was possible within the medium of manga, was to exhibit the heroine's female-sexed body.

Such scenes could be found both in early works like *The Rose of Versailles*, and later works like *Hana-Kimi* and *Ouran*. In these scenes, the heroine's physical body was used as a "truthrevealing" device, showing the narrative's intrinsic conflation of sex and gender. Accordingly, the most effective ideological weapon that was used to subdue the subversive potential of *otokoyaku*, and later the cross-dressed heroine, was heterosexuality.

As discussed earlier, the *otokoyaku*'s training in performing masculinity was claimed by the Takarazuka authorities to educate her into becoming the patriarchal ideal of the Good Wife, Wise Mother. Accordingly, the *otokoyaku* was accepted to retire around her mid-twenties, which was called "graduation" ("sotsugyou"; my trans.), and find a husband. Marriage marked the moment of fulfillment, when the *otokoyaku* would stop performing ideal masculinity, and start embodying her natural femininity for her husband. In other words, the *otokoyaku* was considered a "shoujo" until marriage when she became a sexually mature woman. This social discourse served to contain potentially transgressive behavior such as cross-dressing (and all its queer implications) within the "shoujo" era of the performers' life, when she was presumed to be sexually immature, dismissing potential homoeroticism between performers and fans. By denoting marriage as both the moment of

sexual maturity and the abandonment of masculine performance, womanhood was equated with conformity to gender roles, which dictated heterosexuality.

This ideologically-charged storyline was adapted into *shoujo* manga, which almost always conclude with a heterosexual relationship when the heroine discards her male disguise, hence emerging as a conventionally feminine figure. Like the *otokoyaku*'s "graduation," this marked the end of the "coming-of-age" narrative for the heroine, when the "truth" behind the *shoujo*'s ambivalent gender was revealed, making her "existence as [a] sexual [being]... conspicuous" (Fujimoto, "Transgender" 96).

In conclusion, the cross-dressed heroine genre in *shoujo* manga represents the adaptation of historical and theatrical precedents of gender-as-performance, such as the Takarazuka Revue. Takarazuka's *otokoyaku* de-essentialized gender by performing masculinity while retaining their femininity, creating a "female masculinity" that blurred the distinctions between male and female identities. This constructed performance was later mirrored in cross-dressed heroines in *shoujo* manga, who adopted male disguises through attire, speech, and gestures. Their ability to convincingly perform masculinity within the gender-framework of their narratives challenged essentialist notions of gender by demonstrating that gender identities are not fixed, but rather contingent on social markers such as clothing and behavior.

The widespread use of fantasy settings in early examples of female cross-dressing manga reflects the influence of Takarazuka's performances, which were often set in the West. This allowed for the exploration of gender fluidity within a safe and distanced framework (Fanasca, Kornfield, Fujimoto, Welker). By situating these stories in exotic or school-based fantasy settings, these works created spaces where traditional gender roles could be subverted without attracting public and official disapproval. However, this

subversion was often contained and neutralized by a return to conventional gender norms, as evidenced by the narrative requirement for heroines to abandon their male disguises and resume conventionally feminine roles at the story's conclusion. In this way, the subversive potential of gender-as-performance in these narratives was always tempered by an ultimate reinforcement of heteronormativity and patriarchy.

The female cross-dressing manga addresses complex questions of gender and performance by creating temporary narrative spaces where gender fluidity can be explored. However, these works also highlight the restrictive influence of societal norms and expectations, which often limit the extent of such explorations. Like the *otokoyaku* who must eventually “graduate” into a life of conventional femininity, the heroines of these manga must similarly conform to normative gender roles as part of their coming-of-age journey, ultimately reflecting the deep entrenchment of gender binaries in both fictional and real-world contexts.

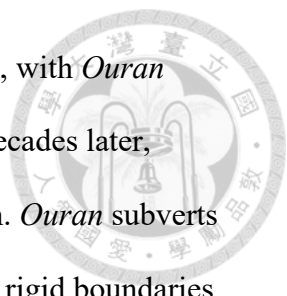
Before I move onto my analysis of *Ouran* and Haruhi in the next chapter, it is important to take a moment to acknowledge the fact that there have been female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga predating *Ouran* that featured heroines resisting heteronormative framings. *The Rose of Versailles* (1972) stands as a prominent example, holding a special place in the history of the *Takarazuka Revue*. *The Rose of Versailles* was first adapted for the stage by the Takarazuka Revue in 1974, with Oscar François de Jarjayes portrayed exclusively by *otokoyaku* (Ogi 88). The production was a monumental success, sparking a surge in the Revue's popularity and leading to numerous restagings over the years. In the manga, the cross-dressed heroine Oscar is part of the French court during the French Revolution. Raised as a boy by her father, Oscar receives education and military training, eventually becoming a commander in the army. Despite her romantic entanglement with a

male character, her arc does not culminate in a marriage or a return to feminine gender expression. Instead, she dies in battle wearing her male attire, with her male love interest meeting a similarly tragic fate.



Although Oscar remains one of the most iconic figures in the history of female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga, key differences between *The Rose of Versailles* and *Ouran High School Host Club* complicate a direct comparison between their heroines. First, Oscar never pretends to be male, as most people in the Palace of Versailles are well aware of her sex, meaning that the conditions that motivate her cross-dressing are considerably different than those of Haruhi's. Second, *The Rose of Versailles* belongs to an older tradition of cross-dressing manga, set in a distant and exotic Western context, creating a buffer between its gender nonconformity and Japanese cultural identity. By contrast, *Ouran* is set in contemporary Japan, within a campus environment, featuring a Japanese heroine. This lack of distance brings *Ouran's* engagement with gender nonconformity closer to the reader's social reality. Third, the framework of gender in *The Rose of Versailles* remains binary. Oscar navigates her gender expression under the constraints of her society, with the awareness that her male upbringing liberates her from the constraints of female gender roles. The tensions born out of the complicated gender dynamics portrayed through Oscar are mainly explored through the societal lens of binary gender roles. In comparison, Haruhi's pragmatic view of gender as external focuses on the fluidity of gender identity. Going beyond the gender roles, *Ouran* challenges the manga tropes rooted in gender essentialism, a perspective reinforced by its subversion of the traditional "gender-reveal" ending (a theme explored in subsequent chapters).

These distinctions underscore the evolution of the cross-dressed heroine trope in *shoujo* manga. *The Rose of Versailles* is one of the important works in the genre that laid



the groundwork for exploring gender fluidity within constrained binaries, with *Ouran* expanding this legacy by interrogating the foundations of gender itself decades later, signaling a broader shift in the genre's approach to gender representation. *Ouran* subverts expectations, presenting a playful yet insightful narrative that challenges rigid boundaries and emphasizes the performative nature of gender roles by dramatizing the concept of gender-as-performance through Haruhi's approach to gender as an "appearance" ("gaiken") that is separate from "what is on the inside" ("nakami"; Bisco, vol.1, p16; my trans.). Haruhi's indifference toward defining her gender challenges the idea that gender is something intrinsic, suggesting instead that it is a role one can perform without any underlying "true" identity. By adopting male attire and behavior without internal conflict, Haruhi aligns with the historical portrayal of cross-dressing heroines. However, her portrayal goes further in treating gender as fluid and performative, not dictated by biological sex or essentialist ideas of identity.

This treatment of gender challenges traditional notions of gender immutability, highlighting how gender roles are shaped by external markers like clothing and speech rather than by inherent qualities. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, unlike other cross-dressing heroines whose masculinity is often portrayed as a temporary disguise, Haruhi's cross-dressing does not create internal conflict. Her detachment from gender norms allows the series to present gender as something that is constructed through appearance and behavior, rather than being tied to an inherent essence. Her refusal to define herself within traditional categories enables *Ouran* to explore gender fluidity in a way that critiques essentialist notions of gender. Furthermore, while earlier cross-dressing narratives often reaffirmed heteronormativity by concluding with the heroine's return to femininity, *Ouran* subverts this trope. Haruhi's journey emphasizes personal growth and success over

romantic fulfillment or a return to conventional gender roles. The series moves away from the traditional “gender-reveal” climax, focusing instead on the fluidity of gender and suggesting that it is adaptable and performative, rather than fixed.



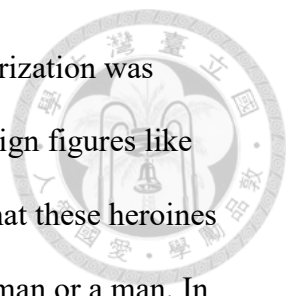
Chapter Two: The Heroine's Gender



In this chapter, I focus on gender ambivalence in *Ouran High School Host Club* and draw on *Hana-Kimi* as a supplementary work to highlight the traditional tropes found in female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga that *Ouran* subverts. Central to my analysis is Haruhi's characterisation, which embodies a fluid detachment from gender identity, suggesting that gender is constructed through appearance and behavior rather than being an intrinsic quality. By performing a male persona without the internal conflicts typical of cross-dressing heroines, Haruhi challenges essentialist views of gender, positioning it as a flexible aspect shaped by external markers. I further examine Haruhi's father, Ryouji, whose ambiguous gender expression deepens the theme of gender ambivalence in *Ouran*. Ryouji, as a bisexual crossdresser who moves fluidly between masculine and feminine roles, has narrative significance as a queer figure who has strong influence on Haruhi's non-traditional views on gender.

Moving forward, I analyze *Ouran*'s subversion of typical cross-dressing resolutions, focusing on the narrative's final developments where Haruhi continues to challenge gender norms even after she abandons her male disguise. Through her relationship with Tamaki and the masked ball scene, in which the revelation of her biological sex paradoxically maintains ambiguity around her gender, I argue that *Ouran* delivers a playful yet critical approach to gender conventions. This scene disrupts the conventional trajectory of crossdressing narratives, where heroines typically revert to traditional femininity. Through these narrative choices regarding Haruhi and Ryouji, *Ouran* offers a departure from gender essentialism and presents gender as an adaptable performance rather than a fixed identity.

As a work published in 2002, *Ouran* is "[built] on a foundation that had been established by previous decades of iconic *shōjo* manga in which gender and sexuality had



become a central theme” (Micah 260). In other words, Haruhi’s characterization was informed by many heroines that came before her, from fantastic and foreign figures like Sapphire, to ordinary Japanese students like Mizuki. There is no doubt that these heroines all posed questions about the nature of gender; what it means to be a woman or a man. In fact, as Micah suggests, gender was a central theme, not only for the plot, but for the growing pains of the heroine, and cross-dressing was often used as a plot device to portray the battle between the heroine and her gender, by allowing her to function outside of the limitations imposed on her by her female gender. I have already discussed the ways in which such conversations around the nature of gender are able to disrupt heteronormative gender ideologies in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I will discuss how Haruhi’s detachment from gender as identity undermines gender essentialism even further, by analyzing scenes where *Ouran* engages with the gender tropes that make up the “foundation” of female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga.

Ouran’s subversion of narrative conventions begins at the genre’s defining feature: female cross-dressing. The term cross-dressing is based on the assumption that gender identity will naturally dictate the appearance an individual chooses for themselves. This is gender essentialism, which supposes one’s biological sex naturally leads to gender identity, which, in turn, leads to gender expression. The word “cross”-dressing suggests an opposite; a heroine, whose natural inclination is to dress and act in female-coded ways, makes the conscious effort to perform - *cross* into - male-coded dress and behavior. This includes attire like male uniforms or suits, masculine first-person pronouns and other male-coded vocabulary, and body language. Among these, the short haircut has been the most iconic marker of masculinity, a tradition that started with the *otokoyaku* in 1932, letting the audience instantly differentiate between male and female roles. The cross-dressing heroines

of *shoujo* manga continued the tradition, cutting their long hair as the first step of taking on a male disguise.

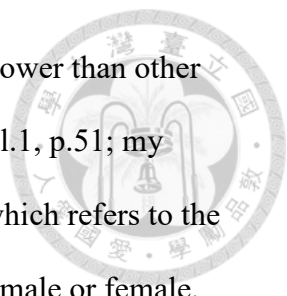
Ouran's engagement with this particular trope demonstrates the wider pattern in which Haruhi's lack of interest in gender serves as a way to comedically undermine the gender ideologies behind said tropes. The heroine cutting her long hair is used as a motif, in which she intentionally takes on a marker of masculinity, the short hair, to disguise her femininity. Furthermore, whereas the actual scene of hair-cutting is often included in the story, as in *Hana-Kimi*, Haruhi has already cut her hair short by the beginning of *Ouran*, with no prior indication of Haruhi's gender-identity. Indeed, her haircut is the reason the male hosts assume that she is male, along with her baggy clothes and big glasses obscuring her face. By way of explanation, Haruhi says that a kid stuck gum in her hair, and it was easier to cut it out rather than try to remove it. As such, Haruhi's lack of attachment to her long hair as a marker of femininity also de-dramatizes the short haircut as an essential marker of masculinity. The only indication that the haircut deserves attention is a scene when this story is repeated by Haruhi's father later on, where he is shocked to find Haruhi with her hair sloppily cut off (Bisco, vol.4, p.16).

To underscore the extent to which *Ouran* underplays the hair cutting motif, *HanaKimi*'s example serves as a useful contrast. The hair-cutting sequence takes up the entire opening page of *Hana-Kimi*, when readers are first introduced to Mizuki. Portrayed in only her underwear, Mizuki's body is presented as proof of her 'real' gender even as she takes on the masculine marker of short hair. In a visual comparison, Mizuki's haircutting sequence takes up a whole page, with her underwear-clad body as the focal point, whereas

Haruhi's is depicted through a simplified style⁴ in a single small panel. This is one instance of how *Ouran* "simultaneously parod[ies] and indulge[s] the stereotypes that defined *shōjo* in the 2000s (Micah 218). As a cross-dressed heroine, Haruhi's character design follows the visual trope of having short hair. However, her short hair is not framed as symbolically significant, since it is not related to her decision to start cross-dressing. This is in contrast to Mizuki, whose short hair is an important marker of masculinity. Here the de-dramatization of the hair-cutting sequence, which is most often the first step of cross-dressing as a performance of masculinity, gives us insight into the strategies *Ouran* uses to undermine gender essentialism implicit in female cross-dressing manga. In Haruhi's case, the short hair is not an intentional effort to appear masculine, but nevertheless is interpreted by the hosts as a marker of masculinity, becoming the basis of their assumptions about Haruhi's gender. That is, the cross-dressing in *Ouran* is unintentional and essentially comedic, in contrast to works more typical of the *shoujo* genre, like *Hana-kimi*, wherein it is arguably the main site of symbolic tension.

The casual portrayal of Haruhi's hair-cutting sequence reflects her nonchalance towards gender, both her own and in general. This becomes an important feature of her portrayal throughout the series. When talking about the host club, she tells Tamaki: "Man, woman, appearance... When it comes to people it's what's on the inside that's important" ("Otoko toka, onna toka, gaiken toka... Ningen, taisetsunano wa nakami deshou?"; Bisco, vol.1, p.15; my trans.). Early on in the manga, Haruhi makes a distinction between sex and gender that is uncommon in earlier cross-dressing *shoujo* manga preceding *Ouran*. She declares that while she is "at least biologically female" ("Seibutsugakujou wa ichiou";

⁴ *chibi*: A style of drawing in Japanese manga where characters are depicted in an exaggerated, childlike manner with large heads and small bodies, often for comedic or emotional effect.



Bisco, vol.1, p.50; my trans.), her “awareness of being a girl or a boy is lower than other people” (“Otokotoka onnano ishikiga hitoyori hikuirashikute”; Bisco, vol.1, p.51; my trans.). Here, she uses the word “biology” (“seibutsugaku”; my trans.), which refers to the biological sex indicated on her ID card, marking one of the two options, male or female. Following this, she uses the word “awareness” (“ishiki”; my trans.), to refer to the personal and individual experience of gender, that is, one’s gender identity. While Haruhi notably does not appear to experience gender dysphoria, as a transgender person might, she also does not show any attachment to the female gender identity connected to her female sex. Additionally, by listing gender alongside appearance—“Man, woman, appearance” (“Otokotoka, onna toka, gaiken toka...”)— she essentially conflates the two and further separates gender from the “important” aspects of a person: “what is on the inside” (“nakami”). This is the most explicit suggestion in *Ouran* that gender as a whole is performance; that is, a matter of presenting as masculine or feminine through external markers such as clothes, behavior, and language. Hence, Haruhi, whose “awareness” does not direct her to perform male or female, is able to perform the part of a male host with ease. For example, when Tamaki Suoh, the president of the host club and main romantic interest later on, discovers that her sex is female through her ID card, Haruhi says that she simply went along with being mistaken for a boy since the host club “had already bought [her] the [male] uniform,” and that she could pay back her debt by working as a host (Bisco, vol.1, p.51). At this point, she also uses the male first-person pronoun “ore” for the first time, rather than the usual gender-neutral “watashi”. Significantly, though, this usage is not consistent throughout the rest of the text, further reflecting her nonchalance towards gender identity.

On the other hand, in *Hana-Kimi*, Mizuki’s failures to perform male-coded behavior while in disguise becomes a continuous source of entertainment for the reader. One such

instance takes place when Mizuki gets into a verbal fight with a male character, regretting her choice of language: “Oh no! I used feminine language without thinking!” (“Nante, onnakotoba tsukatteshimatta”; Nakajo, vol.2, p.24; my trans.). In another scene, she is asked whether girls in America are more attractive, which makes her flustered: “How can he ask a girl that question?” (Nakajo, vol.1, p.15). In both cases Mizuki’s inner thoughts align with female-coded behavior, causing moments of failure in her male performance where “her femininity is constantly emphasized to the reader” (Kornfield 221).

Furthermore, her “awareness” of gender is always very high, as she constantly categorizes her own actions through the lens of binary gender. In *Hana-Kimi*, Mizuki’s “biological sex is the determining factor in gender identity” and “not even her successful two-year crossdressing experience...can suggest that gender is more complex than biology” (Kornfield 222). In comparison, Haruhi’s effortless gender performance subverts the trope of a heroine failing to perform masculinity, exemplified by Mizuki.

Mizuki’s characterization operates on the essentialist assumption that the heroine, whose biological sex is female, naturally identifies with the female gender and chooses to express that identity according to societal norms. Hence, her portrayal of a male persona comes with effort and struggle, since she is going against her natural inclinations to act in female-coded ways. These assumptions drive the characterization of Mizuki, and the narrative never lets the reader forget that she is a girl wearing boys’ clothes. Mizuki’s struggles suggest the heroine’s cross-dressing is simply a “costume— something to put on and take off that is unrelated to the actual self” (Kornfield 221) and the male persona she portrays is a disguise; something she will eventually take off to reveal the truth. In this sense *Hana-Kimi* “situates cross-dressing as something humorous, useful, and completely unrelated to one’s gender and personality” (Kornfield 221). Cross-dressing is simply a tool

of deception, whereas the female gender of the heroine is intrinsic and absolute in dictating her behavior and personality.

On the other hand, Haruhi's cross-dressing is not intended to cover a true female gender, but to show that gender as a whole can be a performance. *Ouran*'s portrayal suggests a relationship between sex and gender identity that is correlative rather than causative, as *Hana-Kimi* seems to suggest. *Ouran* comedically draws attention to gender essentialist assumptions in such a way that it can be read as a subversive commentary on the genre's self-contradictory perpetuation of these assumptions; self-contradictory in the sense that this genre's defining feature is gender subversion through cross-dressing. Haruhi's gender performance suggests that while the male disguise is indeed a "costume—something to put on and take off that is unrelated to the actual self" (Kornfield 221), so too is all gender. The ease with which Haruhi portrays gender suggests that gender in fact is no more than an appearance. As appearance, "[c]ross-dressing (as a gender and gendered performance) ... involves framing: select components (artifacts, practices) are assembled and configured in desired ways" (Robertson 40). Artifacts and practices, in this case range from gender-coded clothes, language, body language, gestures, that can be used to express identification with a certain gender. Although cross-dressing consciously utilizes the artifacts and practices associated with a certain gender, every individual actually participates in this practice of expressing gender through appearances. Hence, gender performance is not limited to cross-dressing but is a universal aspect of how individuals express their gender.

In *Ouran*, this is characterized by Haruhi's pragmatist approach to gender, suggesting that everyone engages in a form of gender performance by selectively adopting gender-coded artifacts in order to be perceived as male or female. This display of pragmatism undermines essentialist ideas that gender identity is fixed or naturally aligned

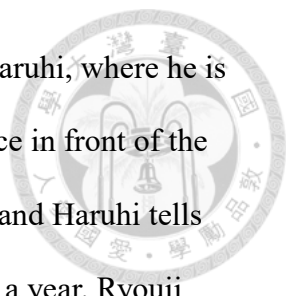
with biological sex, demonstrating a far more situational and contextual causation. Whereas works like *Hana-Kimi* imply that the heroine's failure to pass as male is a result of her intrinsic femininity, this framework of gender-as-performance suggests that these failures are the result of not adopting the correct gender-coded behaviors; simply put, of not doing it right. By framing gender as a set of practices that anyone can adopt or fail to adopt, this passage presents gender as a performance akin to a theatrical role—one that relies on external signifiers rather than innate qualities.

To further explore how this pragmatic framework of gender in *Ouran* applies to a Japanese context of gender and sexuality, I now turn to Haruhi's father Ryouji, who is a bisexual *okama*⁵. Ryouji's fluid gender expression plays a fundamental role in shaping Haruhi's characterization as a cross-dressed heroine, providing her with a model of gender performance that challenges societal binaries (Micah 228). Additionally, Ryouji as an *okama* character challenges norms by blending masculinity and femininity in ways that persist beyond temporary disguise, dressing up as a woman both for his work at an *okama* club, and in his daily life when going out in public. This highlights the ways *shoujo* manga can use gender performance not only as a plot device but as a critique of rigid gender roles, offering an alternative representation that is more inclusive of queer identities and varied gender possibilities, such as *okama*. He starts using the name Ranka after he starts crossdressing to "[work] long hours in order to provide for Haruhi" (Micah 228). Ryouji's transformation to Ranka is explained by his wife's death, which drives him to "[feel] the need to be both a mother and father to Haruhi" (Micah 228). This transformation happens gradually during Haruhi's childhood, and has an effect on forming her perception of gender

⁵ A Japanese term sometimes used to refer to effeminate gay men, cross-dressers, or drag queens.

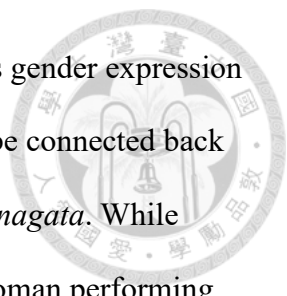
as something trivial and surface, “appearance” (“gaiken”) that is separate from what is on the “inside” (“nakami”).

For example, sometime after his wife’s death, Ryouji, thinking Haruhi is too ashamed to bring him to parents day at school because he is too effeminate, dresses in a suit in an attempt to show her “what a manly father [he] can be” (Bisco, vol.3, p.170). However, young Haruhi is merely confused, and tells him that “it doesn’t matter”. Eventually Ryouji finds out that Haruhi does not want him to attend parents’ day because she wants him to rest on his day off, since he works long hours to provide for the two of them (Bisco, vol.3, p.172). In a later scene, two boys attempt to bully her because of Ryouji, asking her whether he plays the “role of the mother” (“yaku”; Bisco, vol.4, p.30; my trans.), since Haruhi does not have a mother. Haruhi is unfazed, and tells them that his feminine presentation is his “preference” and “inclination” (“shumi”, “seiheki”; Bisco, vol.4, p.31; my trans.). There is a notable blurring of categories in these scenes: gender identity, sexuality, cross-dressing, and occupation are all used interchangeably. More importantly, Haruhi does not seem to care about Ryouji’s sexuality or gender expression. The only things that matter are the fact that he is her father and the bond that they share; and all else is “appearance” (“gaiken”). The manga itself upholds this order of priorities: whether Ryouji appears in male-coded or female-coded clothing, his role as Haruhi’s caretaker and protector is always foregrounded. Ryouji’s gender presentation (“appearance”) is portrayed as fluid and non-essential, whereas their relationship (the “inside”) is framed as the only truly essential part of his character. This is an example of the remarkable coherence of *Ouran*’s conceptual and technical layers, in that Haruhi’s nonchalance towards gender and “appearance” is reflected by the text’s visual construction of Ryouji.



This is especially evident in Ryouji's last important scene with Haruhi, where he is dressed in casual clothing and not wearing makeup. This scene takes place in front of the grave of Haruhi's mother, where the Fujiokas come together as a family and Haruhi tells her father that she is planning to accept a scholarship to study abroad for a year. Ryouji gives her his support and offers to support her financially so that she does not have to depend on the scholarship, and go later if she chooses. As this scene represents Ryouji letting go of Haruhi to let her grow into an independent person, there might be significance in Ryouji not appearing as Ranka. There are suggestions that Ranka represents Ryouji taking on the role of a mother, such as the boys taunting young Haruhi that Ryouji is playing a mother role (Bisco, vol.4, p.30), or Ryouji calling Haruhi "the cute daughter I gave birth to" ("kawaiku unda"; Bisco, vol.4, p.16; my trans.) and dressing her up in feminine outfits. In contrast, Ryouji's relatively plain appearance in this scene could be interpreted as him giving the mother role back to his dead wife. There is no longer a need for a female role model to guide Haruhi, as she takes the first step into independence and decides to leave behind her new friends and new romantic relationship with Tamaki to pursue her dreams. This interpretation suggests that Ryouji was being restored to his original role as the father.

However, it should be remembered that Ryouji exists not just to (potentially) replace the female role model of Haruhi's mother, as after her death, Ryouji also becomes the family's main source of income. Indeed, the financial support Ryouji offers Haruhi is a credit card he hides in his makeup box, a motif of his feminine gender expression and occupation as Ranka. This suggests that Ranka is an integral part of Ryouji's personal identity, going beyond a simple guise he puts on, which is supported by the fact that he appears as Ranka in later scenes. Rather than simply "restoring" Ryouji to his "true"



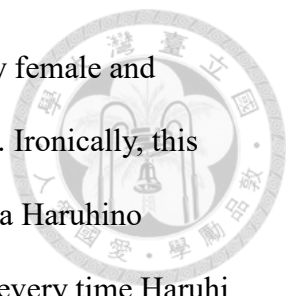
gender, *Ouran* lets him present both masculine and feminine, without his gender expression affecting his primary role as Haruhi's caretaker. This attitude may even be connected back to the history of male cross-dressing discussed in Chapter One, to the *onnagata*. While Haruhi is able to challenge the notion of the *otokoyaku* as an ordinary woman performing masculinity, Ryouji does the same with the *onnagata*, who is a man that transforms into a woman. Haruhi's lack of identification with either gender and Ryouji's ability to move seamlessly between the two undermine the supposed stability of the concept of gender itself. Gender is presented as external markers, as "appearance," and as performance. This undermining further complicates the resolution of the story, which commonly comes in the form of a heterosexual romance, when the heroine "remove[s] [her] male costume and fall[s] into the arms of the one [she] love[s]" (Fujimoto, "Place" 34).

The trope of the heterosexual romance ending is evoked by the Zuka Club, when they run into Haruhi on her first date with Tamaki. They announce that Haruhi will not be able to convincingly perform masculinity anymore, because "a girl changes when she falls in love," and Benibara claims that Haruhi now appears as "a girl, no matter how you look at it" ("Dou mitemo onnanoko darou kanojo wa"; Bisco, vol.18, p.86; my trans.). This claim is based on the same gender ideologies that drive the concept of *sotsugyou*, the end of the *otokoyaku*'s cross-dressing career is marked by marriage, representing sexual maturity and womanhood, where the *otokoyaku* is restored to her "real" gender. The Zuka Club's claim is challenged on two levels, first, immediately by Kyouya, and then later in the ballroom scene of the gender-reveal, which I will discuss in the following section. In this scene, Kyouya, the character established as the most perceptive member of the Host Club throughout the series, replies to the Zuka Club's claim by acknowledging that there has

been a change in Haruhi, but denies that this change is caused by Tamaki (Bisco, vol.18, p.87).

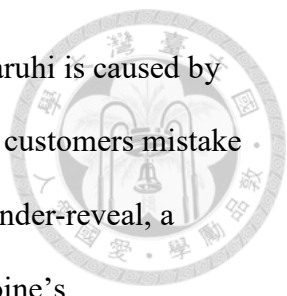
Based on these scenes, I argue that the graveyard scene replaces the gender-reveal and heterosexual romance as the resolution of the story in *Ouran*. It marks the moment of self-actualisation, wherein Haruhi becomes an individual with fully realized potential who is able to make the hard decisions to pursue her dreams. Diverging from the usual tropes, Haruhi's character arc reaches its summit independently of her gender or romantic relationship. Her personal growth is not a result of her relationship with Tamaki; instead, that relationship, along with the friendships she has cultivated, empowers her to make the decision to temporarily step away from those bonds to pursue what is best for herself. Haruhi's choice to remove her male disguise does not coincide with the start of her relationship with Tamaki, but rather follows a pivotal moment in the graveyard scene. Here, she decides to reveal her biological sex to her customers, whom she has come to genuinely value as friends, out of a desire for honesty and respect.

Haruhi's decision to reveal her gender on her own terms demonstrates a strong sense of agency that contrasts with her typical aloofness and nonchalance, underscoring her character growth. Previously, Haruhi displayed little concern about maintaining her disguise, as seen when Kasanoda accidentally sees her changing clothes (Bisco, vol.8, p.142). This shift from indifference to taking control of her own gender-reveal highlights her evolving self-awareness and autonomy. At her request, the Host Club plans a masked ball event to reveal Haruhi's biological sex. The setting itself for Haruhi's gender-reveal scene is significant, because as the 'truth' is revealed, "[t]he performative nature of gender as expressed in [cross-dressing] narratives is reinforced" by the "performative [situation]" (Fanasca 11) of the masked ball. In this scene, Haruhi is dressed up by the hosts in a



longhaired wig and ballgown, that does not actually differ from the many female and male-coded costumes she is made to wear by others throughout the series. Ironically, this costume is intended to reveal “the true form of Haruhi Fujioka” (“Fujioka Haruhino hontouno sugata”; Bisco, vol.18 , p.135; my trans.), despite the fact that every time Haruhi appears in the story in a clearly female-coded outfit, it is because of somebody else forcing her to do so. That is, it does not reflect her own desired form in those moments. Haruhi removes the wig after the initial reveal, which is possibly intended to underline it as a costume. After the reveal, many of the customers are supportive, saying they already knew about Haruhi’s situation and relationship with Tamaki. However, it is later revealed that the customers in fact assume that Haruhi is biologically male and had actually been revealing that she enjoyed cross-dressing in female clothes (Bisco, vol.8, p.46). This is significant because it completely disproves Benibara’s claim that Haruhi irrefutably appears as a girl. This passage demonstrates that, in fact, *Ouran* challenges the gender ideologies that have become embedded in the tropes of the genre until the very end.

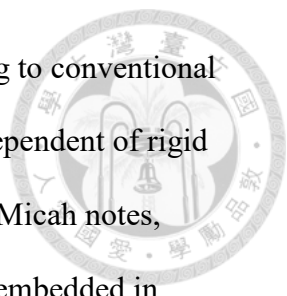
These final chapters in the work demonstrate *Ouran*’s unique pattern of engaging with genre conventions. First, the narrative acknowledges the trope by appearing to follow its conventions; most notably, when Benibara claims that Haruhi will not be able to successfully perform masculinity because she has fallen in love (and is growing out being a “shoujo” and into a woman), and the following gender-reveal at the ball. These scenes echo the numerous works preceding *Ouran*, in which such plot elements traditionally culminate with the heroine fully embracing conventional femininity within a new heterosexual relationship, leaving behind all traces of her previous cross-dressing and any associated masculinity. *Ouran*’s significance thus lies in its willingness to play with genre conventions, offering subtle subversions of the expected outcomes. First, Kyouya, the most



observant and reliable character in the story, denies that the change in Haruhi is caused by Tamaki. Then, Benibara's claim is further challenged by the fact that the customers mistake Haruhi's reveal as her confession to a cross-dressing hobby. Here, the gender-reveal, a trope that usually serves to undo all gender ambiguity caused by the heroine's crossdressing, is revealed to do the exact opposite and thus causes further uncertainty around gender and sexuality. Rather than forcing a feminine self-expression onto Haruhi, the narrative subverts expectations around the trope's conventional conclusions for comedic effect.

In conclusion, although *Ouran High School Host Club* is “not necessarily straightforward in its own articulations of gender politics” (Micah 230), it still offers powerful alternatives to the prevailing narratives in *shoujo* manga by parodying genre conventions and questioning traditional notions of gender identity. Unlike typical heroines, Haruhi does not conform to established gender roles. She views gender as a matter of “appearance” rather than an inherent identity, which allows her to present herself as male with ease for practical purposes, such as working as a host to repay her debt. The series subverts the trope of cross-dressing by portraying Haruhi's disguise as something imposed upon her, rather than a choice she makes with agency, thereby introducing gender pragmatism to the deliberate performance of masculinity. This pragmatic approach to gender is reinforced through her relationship with her father, Ryouji, whose cross-dressing and fluid gender identity influence Haruhi's own understanding of gender.

By both acknowledging and undermining genre conventions, *Ouran* challenges gender essentialism in *shoujo* manga by portraying gender as fluid and constructed through external markers rather than an inherent trait. Haruhi's effortless shifts between male and female personas, contrasted with Mizuki's struggles in *Hana-Kimi*, critique the essentialist



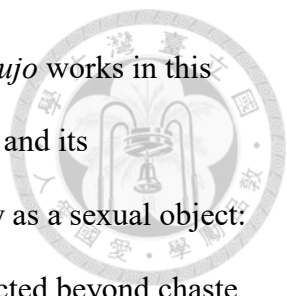
portrayals of gender in earlier *shoujo* manga works. Rather than reverting to conventional femininity through heterosexual romance, Haruhi's journey remains independent of rigid gender expectations, emphasizing the performative nature of gender. As Micah notes, *Ouran*'s use of parody creates a layered commentary on the stereotypes embedded in *shoujo* manga, offering a nuanced critique of gender essentialism and contributing significantly to the exploration of gender identity in cross-dressing narratives (218). These insights provide a foundation for the discussion in the next chapter, which will shift focus to the interactions between the heroine and the male characters, further exploring how *Ouran* negotiates trope-based expectations around gender, and the dynamics of gender performance.



Chapter Three: Gender and Sexuality Nuances in Interpersonal Relationships

In the world of disguised heroines, acts of cross-dressing and gender performance do not happen in isolation. The heroine's male disguise disrupts expectations around how different genders interact and socialize with each other. Once the heroine's cross-dressing blurs boundaries of gender, questions about sexuality arise naturally within interpersonal relationships. As mentioned earlier, *shoujo* manga most commonly includes narratives of friendship, self-discovery and growth as an individual. Interpersonal relationships are always the main catalysts of plot progression. Additionally, the cross-dressing genre increases the potential for diverse relationship dynamics, as its gender-play disrupts the traditional rules of interaction typically depicted in stories focused on heterosexual romance. These disruptions are generally caused by the disguise of the heroine, where any romantic interactions lead to underlying queer tones. Some examples of such disruptions include female characters who are attracted to the heroine while she is disguised as a boy, or, depictions of romance between the heroine and male characters visually resembling a male/male couple (Fujimoto "Transgender" 86,93; Micah 106; Welker 848).

As this chapter will show, attempts to categorize interpersonal relationships as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or even just queer proves challenging. Ultimately, the ambiguity regarding the nature of these relationships is overridden by the narrative, which intervenes at moments where queer potential emerges to reframe the characters and relationships as straight. Furthermore, there are instances of such reframing being done through explicitly queer characters in both *Ouran* (Haruhi's bisexual father) and *Hana-Kimi* (the gay school doctor), which I will read as an attempt to legitimize the narrative's erasure of queer implications.



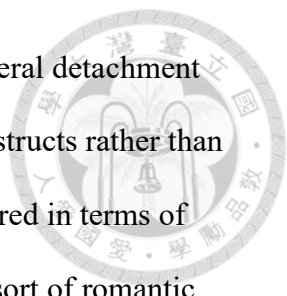
Before I start my analysis, it is important to note that in most *shoujo* works in this genre, including *Ouran* and *Hana-Kimi*, sexuality is limited to attraction and its implications of sexual identity. There is no real consideration of the body as a sexual object: Genitals are never discussed, and sexual acts are not mentioned nor depicted beyond chaste kisses. There are moments where the narrative shows awareness of the existence of sexual acts, specifically in the form of a rape threat against the heroine. Sexual intimacy does not fit in with the chaste and innocent fantasy world of *shoujo* manga romances, at least in this genre. The fact that depictions of sexual acts are limited to rape threats is further evidence that physical intimacy belongs in the dangerous and real adult world that exists outside of these narratives. Within the fantasy world of *shoujo* manga, the sexual aspect of the body is largely absent from discussions of romance.

As discussed in the first chapter, the fantasy world is part of the dynamics that enable the emergence of complex gender and sexuality dynamics. The fantastical nature of the spaces where these stories unfold plays an important role in understanding the mechanisms behind interpersonal relationships. Regarding the significance of the campus setting, Fanasca argues that the lack of “exotic setting[s],” characteristic of previous examples from this genre, forces cross-dressing into being “framed within a strong heteronormative narrative,” as the “[exploration of] different declinations of gender and sexuality” now “seems forbidden” (15). However, in *Ouran*, while the broader campus setting appears “embedded in [a] reality” that does not “[transcend] the everyday routine” (Fanasca 15), the narrative significantly creates microcosms within the campus setting that provide “exotic spaces”. These spaces microcosm are created first and foremost through the Host Club, and to a lesser degree, the Zuka Club.



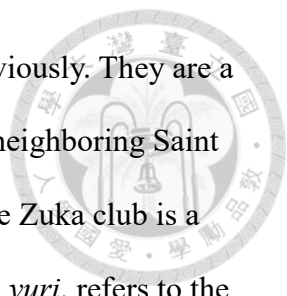
The Host Club is made up of members who embody “types” or *kei*, as each host is characterized by a trope found in *shoujo* manga. For example, when Haruhi first meets the Host Club, Tamaki introduces each member by their *kei*; he is the “prince” type, Honey is the “cute” type, Kyouya is the “cool” type etc. This set-up works at two levels: First, at the meta-level as a self-reflexive critique, where *Ouran* recognizes-and pokes fun at its genre’s overdone characterization; and second, at the narrative-level, where these “fascinating types” (Saitou 146) are marketed as consumable performances that the hosts use to draw customers. For example, Honey loves cute things and sweets, and his charm as a host comes from the exaggerated display of these traits to entertain the customers. Kyouya, the member who largely manages the club, describes this as “[applying] [their] individual talents to meet the needs of [the] customers” (Bisco, vol 1, p.14).

In addition to the hosts’ *kei*, the themed costumes and decor that they use to entertain customers create another layer of performance within the already fantastical setting of the Host Club. These costumes and decor amplify the fantasy setting by temporarily transforming the club room into geologically or chronologically distant places such as feudal Europe, Edo Japan, or a tropical country among others. As a setting where performance is always present and explicit, the Host Club frames Haruhi’s gender performance within the broader context of being an entertainer. Haruhi is declared a “natural” by the other hosts after her first interactions with female customers as a male host. “Natural” in this context means that she does not have to depend on being a *kei*, or exaggerating a specific part of her personality to attract customers. This also provides Haruhi room for growth as the main character, as she does not represent nor perform a specific *kei* with set rules for characterization.



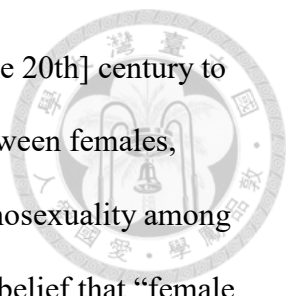
Haruhi's disinterest in adopting a specific *kei* aligns with her general detachment from gender roles, as she views both *kei* and gender as performative constructs rather than inherent identities. The consequences of this disinterest are mostly explored in terms of gender rather than sexuality in *Ouran*, as she is largely oblivious to any sort of romantic advance, regardless of the other person's gender. In the first place, her friendships with girls at the school are limited to friendly host-customer relationships. There are therefore very few opportunities to explore homoeroticism via these interactions. The very first of these is the kiss that Haruhi shares with a customer during a ball. Kyouya (the manager of the club) offers to decrease Haruhi's debt if she agrees to offer a kiss on the cheek as a reward to the "princess of the ball". When Tamaki tries to stop the kiss from happening, he accidentally pushes Haruhi, causing her to kiss the customer on the lips instead of the cheek. A second kiss almost happens when a member of the Zuka club tries to kiss Haruhi on-stage, prevented successfully this time by Tamaki.

Strikingly, the narrative does not legitimate these interactions as queer acts. On the contrary, Ranka, a male queer character, is used to undermine the homoeroticism of these scenes by reinforcing a heteronormative framing: "It's obvious they would stop at a peck. What are you doing, getting so distraught over two girls kissing anyway?" ("Annano sundameni kimatteru ja nai. Tsuuka onnanoko doushino chuuni sonna torimidashite dousunnayo"; Bisco, vol.8, p.7; my trans.) Here, Ranka not only completely dismisses any potential for this kiss to lead to romance but goes further to ridicule Tamaki for treating the kiss as an act of intimacy. Tamaki appears to be the only one in the manga that takes intimacy between Haruhi and other female characters seriously enough to feel threatened by it, as I will explore in the next section.



It is worth here briefly introducing the Zuka Club mentioned previously. They are a reimagining of the Takarazuka Revue, a rival to the Host Club from the neighboring Saint Lobelia Girls' Academy, a prestigious neighboring all-female school. The Zuka club is a subdivision of the "White Lily League," and the word "lily" in Japanese, *yuri*, refers to the genre that depicts lesbian relationships. This word-play is connected to the suggested romantic relationship between the top three members, one of whom is the president, Benio "Benibara" Amakusa. The nickname "Benibara" is a reference to "berubara," which is the abbreviation of the Japanese name for *The Rose of Versailles*, the manga created the boom in popularity for the Takarazuka Revue when adapted to the stage in 1974, and hence has an important place in the Revue's history (Ogi 88, Robertson 74). The top three members of the Zuka Club discover Haruhi by chance, and try to convince her to leave the Host Club and transfer to St. Lobelia. As rivals, they are portrayed as antagonistic: The fans of the club, especially those of the *otokoyaku* Benibara, are portrayed as fervent devotees. Both members and fans share a hatred of men, and express approval of same-sex female relationships.

Although the Zuka Club at first glance appears intentionally queer-coded, the construction of its members' interpersonal relationships in fact completely aligns with the narrative's dismissal of queer possibilities. The top three members of the Zuka Club describe their relationship, as "renai" ("real love"; Bisco, vol.3, p.80; my trans.). This term, despite seeming to acknowledge and legitimate queer romance, actually parodies the historical discourse on Takarazuka and broader discourse on affectionate relationships between young women. During the Meiji Period, Christian private girls' schools, such as *Ouran's* fictional Saint Lobelia Academy, adopted an education model for "middle- and upper-class girls...that taught 'chastity, refinement, and sophistication'" (Micah 65). This



lead to the birth of the term *S-Class*, which was “coined at the turn of [the 20th] century to refer specifically to a passionate, but supposedly platonic, friendship between females, although sexologists found it difficult to distinguish friendship from homosexuality among girls and women” (Robertson 68). The Zuka Club appears to uphold the belief that “female homosexuality [is]...spiritual” (Robertson 68) and “[a] woman’s beauty lies in a pure mind... unyielding to superficial beauty, power or *lust*...” (my emphasis), establishing a homosocial dynamic where their shared gender represents equality of their “souls” (Bisco, vol.3, p.80). *Ouran*’s portrayal of Zuka fits in with the theories of *S-Class* and its platonic nature, which suggests that any intimacy shared between Benibara and Haruhi would indeed “stop at a peck,” as Ranka claims. Indeed, none of the Host Club members react to the Zuka Club in a way that acknowledges queer potential except Tamaki, who immediately exclaims “in other words: lesbians!!?” (“Teyuuka, rezu!!?”; Bisco, vol.3, p.78; my trans.). His outburst is described as “culture shock” (Bisco, vol.3, p.81) by the other members who remain unfazed. This reflects the non-interchangeability of Japanese “douseisai” with the Western queer concept of lesbianism. Lesbianism has historically been framed as a threat to heteronormative mainstream society. By contrast, *S-Class* coexists quite easily with heteronormative social norms, and is thus not read as threatening to the status quo. Overall, the Zuka Club supports Kornfield’s observation that, in *Ouran*, the purpose of “same-sex couples [is to] create humor” (224). This observation also holds true for male/male couples as well as lesbian relationships.

References to Boys’ Love (BL) are acknowledged by fans of *Ouran* , with many crediting Bisco with having created the first “*fujoshi* comedy” (Micah 106). The word *fujoshi* refers to female BL fans, and ties *Ouran*’s portrayals of male homosexuality directly to BL. Although it is not possible to explore all the implications of this idea within the

scope of this thesis, it must be noted that BL is widely accepted to have little grounding in the real dynamics of male/male relationships, relying instead on formulaic, trope-heavy plots that show little concern for accurate representation (Fujimoto, “Place” 33; Welker 857). Likewise, depictions of male homosexuality receive the same comedic treatment in *Ouran* as it does in BL. Furthermore, a parallel can be drawn between *Ouran*’s representation of *kei* and its representations of male homosexuality and BL references, in the sense that *Ouran* recognizes the trope, and twists and exaggerates it for comedic effect.

In fact, BL is explicitly used as *kei* in the manga, where the twin hosts, the Hitachiin brothers, use it as part of their marketing strategy in the club to appeal to female customers. This *kei* builds on their already close relationship as twins, creating a story of “forbidden love” which resonates strongly with BL tropes such as the *seme-uke* dynamic, where the couple is made up of *seme*, a dominant “top” partner with traditionally masculine personality traits, and *uke*, a submissive “bottom” partner with traditionally female personality traits. The scenes in the host club where the twins act out these roles are also visually represented in a way that mimics BL manga, in close-up panels of hands and faces, decorated with flowers. These scenes are immediately off-set by a drastic panout, showing the twins clearly performing the scene for female customers, who are overjoyed and blushing. There is no suggestion of sexual or romantic attraction between the twins beyond such performances. It is hence safe to say that this is one of the rare instances where same-sex attraction is purely performed for an audience.

Ouran’s portrayal of male homosexuality in the case of the twins appears to form part of the Host Club’s on-stage entertainment. This kind of homoeroticism is also used in Takarazuka and other female-cross dressing *shoujo* manga, wrapping potentially taboo content in a performance limited to a stage. By explicitly framing the twins’ homoeroticism

as performance, and then taking it to its extreme as a taboo, *Ouran* engages with the tropes of gender and sexuality that connect the roots of both the BL and female cross-dressing genres. Based on the representation of the twins, it would appear that *Ouran*'s limited portrayal of male homosexuality supports the claim that "same-sex couples create humor" (Kornfield 224).

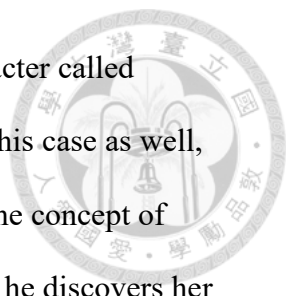
However, there is one more aspect to the trope of male homosexuality in female cross-dressing manga worth considering that emerges uniquely from the heroine's performance of masculinity, as "she embodies the homoerotic archetype of the *bishōnen* alongside the other hosts" (Micah 106). This trope, which I call "Am I gay?", is a particularly striking vehicle for the exploration—and containment, of queer themes. Yukari Fujimoto describes this trope as the moment when "the hero finds himself attracted to the cross-dressed heroine; he worries because his object of desire is male; he eventually finds out she is female and is relieved to discover that he is normal" ("Transgender" 80). At first glance, this trope appears to carry queer undertones in the implicit suggestion that it is not gender that determines who you love. However, in most cases, the narrative undermines this queer potential through the narrative tool of "instinct" (*honnou*): the hero's unconscious awareness that the cross-dressed heroine is, in fact, a girl. The apparently "homosexual attraction" these characters feel is suggested to be a "[response] to the 'inherent' femininity" (Kornfield 222) of the heroine. Additionally, these male characters are rarely allowed to be fooled by the heroine's disguise for long.

To further illustrate how the "Am I gay?" trope operates within cross-dressing narratives, *Hana-Kimi* provides a prominent example that aligns closely with the patterns described by Fujimoto. This trope plays a central role in the story, where the character Shuichi Nakatsu—Mizuki's close friend and a secondary love interest—embodies the hero



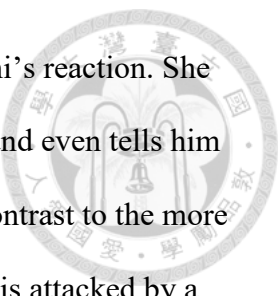
who grapples with his attraction to the cross-dressed heroine, fitting the trope's traditional structure. Unlike the main love interest, Nakatsu does not discover Mizuki's gender until the later stages in the manga. Confused at first by his attraction to the cross-dressed Mizuki, Nakatsu gradually comes to accept that he is gay. There are even moments in *Hana-Kimi* when the queer nature of this attraction is acknowledged, such as Nakatsu's inner dialogue: "So maybe I am gay. If I can stop him from making Mizuki cry— I don't care if that makes me gay!" (Nakajo, vol.1, p.121). Later on, when he learns that Mizuki is a girl, he has a moment of relief—"Wait, does that mean I'm not gay?", which he quickly dismisses—"That's not the point!" (Nakajo, vol.23, p.92). By allocating these moments of queer potential to the secondary love interest (whose feelings are never returned by Mizuki), *Hana-Kimi* is able to uphold the "true" heterosexual romance with the main love interest who is aware of Mizuki's gender from the start, while using the "Am I gay?" trope for comedic effect and character building for Nakatsu.

Ultimately, however, the narrative insists on re-framing Nakatsu as straight, even after he comes to terms with his homosexual attraction, and confesses to Mizuki while he is still under the impression that she's a boy. As with Ryouji in *Ouran*, Umeda, a male queer character is used as a mouthpiece for this framing. Umeda explains to Mizuki: "From what I've seen, he's totally straight. He's just reacting to the "femininity" you can't hide. He's an impulsive kid." (Nakajo, vol.6, p.148). The original word used for "impulsive" here is *yaseiji*, made up of the characters for "wild/feral" and "child," formally referring to a child raised in the wilderness by animals rather than in human society. Here, the word refers again to *honnou*, with the implication that Nakatsu has strong instincts that allows him to unconsciously know that Mizuki is a girl.



In *Ouran*, the “Am I gay?” trope is explored through a side-character called Kasanoda Ritsu, who becomes attracted to the cross-dressed Haruhi. In this case as well, the queer connotations are quickly neutralized by the narrative through the concept of *honno*. Kasanoda finds himself thinking of Haruhi as a girl even before he discovers her secret, “as if unconsciously aware of [her] biological sex” (Kornfield 223). On the other hand, even after the discovery, Kasanoda appears confused by his attraction, depicted pulling petals off a daisy in a daze, chanting “...boy, girl, boy, girl...” (Bisco, vol.8, p.138) as he thinks of Haruhi. This underlines the gender ambiguity of the performance itself: his attraction to the cross-dressed Haruhi drives Kasanoda to question his heterosexual identity despite the ‘reveal’ of the female body underneath the male disguise. This moment hence implicitly acknowledges the disruptive power of female cross-dressing over heteronormativity.

The body of the heroine also plays a central role in the rape threat trope, the final piece in the narrative’s process of neutralizing any suggestion of homoeroticism. The rape threat underlines the “sexual frailty” of the heroines who otherwise “act like men and compete on the same scholastic and athletic grounds with men,” and effectively acts as a “rhetorical device that reaffirms the ‘true (bio)gender’” of the heroine (Kornfield 223). *Ouran* engages with this trope when Haruhi gets injured after a fight with a group of men who had been harassing a girl. When Tamaki asks: “What did you, as a girl, think you could do against three boys?” she answers: ““What does being a girl have to do with it? There’s no time to think when you’re on the spot...” (“Onna no jibun hitoride, yarou sanninmo nantoka dekirutte doushite omouwake”; Bisco, vol.3, p.32; my trans.). In an attempt to make Haruhi acknowledge the recklessness of her actions, Kyouya makes the drastic move of staging a rape threat to demonstrate her vulnerability to sexual violence as



a woman. Where *Ouran* departs from this very common trope is in Haruhi's reaction. She immediately recognizes Kyouya's intentions as "teaching her a lesson," and even tells him that he is "gentle" ("yasashii"; Bisco, vol.3, p.53; my trans.). This is in contrast to the more typical example in *Hana-Kimi*, where Mizuki faints out of fear when she is attacked by a friend. Furthermore, whereas Mizuki is saved by Sano, Tamaki only enters the scene after Kyouya has already stopped his fake attack. After the staged rape threat, *Ouran* does not reach a definitive conclusion with the attempted "lesson". She does not accept nor outright reject the suggested notion that her body is weaker than or vulnerable to sexual attacks by men. *Ouran*'s narrative does not override the ambiguity around the end to this scene, acknowledging the existence of the threat of sexual violence, without validating stereotypes about supposed female frailty.

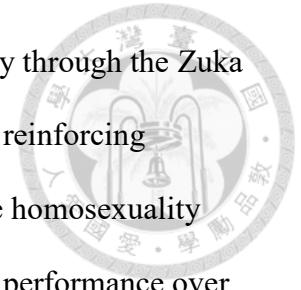
These scenes demonstrate the intertwined dynamics of gender performance and sexual politics in cross-dressed heroine narratives. Whereas instances of isolated gender performances, such as when women wear male uniforms or use male pronouns, are presented non-threatening, the narrative quickly puts a stop to them once they start fuelling queer potential in interpersonal relationships. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the acknowledgement of sexual acts in the form of rape threats acts as a reminder that the female-centric fantasy worlds of Takarazuka and *shoujo* manga are vulnerable to intrusions by the real-world - that is, male-dominated - sexual-politics. Even when the heroine convincingly performs masculinity, the reinforcement of her "(bio)gender" in scenes of male sexual violence undermines her subversion of power dynamics thus far through crossdressing, emphasizing instead the supposedly essential and unchangeable inferiority of the female gender.

In conclusion, it is evident female cross-dressing narratives intertwine gender and sexuality in complex and often contradictory ways. The male disguise of the heroine not only disrupts traditional gender roles but also introduces questions of sexuality within interpersonal relationships. However, despite the initially promising implications of gender ambiguity and queer(ed) sexuality, the narrative structures ultimately reinforce a heteronormative framework. This reinforcement is often achieved through the intervention of queer characters such as Ryouji and Umeda, who legitimize the erasure of queer implications.

In *Ouran* and *Hana-Kimi*, sexuality is portrayed primarily through romantic attraction. Since physical intimacy is largely absent from the texts, except for rape threats, they reinforce the chaste fantasy typical of *shoujo* manga. Performative spaces like the Host Club explore gender playfully, but contain queer potential by framing same-sex attractions as comedic or non-threatening. The “Am I gay?” trope exemplifies this, as characters who experience same-sex attraction to the cross-dressed heroine are reassured of their heterosexuality through *honnou*, or an instinctive recognition of her biological sex. This trope, while briefly allowing queer exploration, ultimately reinforces heteronormativity by framing these attractions as misunderstandings. Rape threats, meanwhile, highlight the heroine’s inherent vulnerability, emphasizing that despite her male persona, her “true” gender renders her susceptible to male aggression, which reinforces traditional gender roles.

Ouran partially subverts these conventions by challenging the standard lessons of female vulnerability, as seen in Haruhi’s characteristically nonchalant reaction to Kyouya’s staged rape threat. Her refusal to accept the lesson that women are inherently weak disrupts the typical reinforcement of gender binaries, instead suggesting a more ambiguous

approach to gender roles. While *Ouran* acknowledges same-sex intimacy through the Zuka Club and *S-Class*, it frames these relationships as platonic and spiritual, reinforcing nonthreatening interpretations of female intimacy. The portrayal of male homosexuality through BL tropes, especially with the Hitachiin twins, also emphasizes performance over genuine attraction, with homoerotic displays presented as exaggerated acts for entertainment. By framing same-sex interactions as part of a comedic, staged performance, *Ouran* contributes to a broader commentary on gender, sexuality, and performance, ultimately maintaining heteronormative structures even as it subverts other aspects of gender norms.



Conclusion

This thesis set out to demonstrate that *Ouran High School Host Club* represents a significant shift in the depiction of gender and gender-related tropes within the genre of female cross-dressing *shoujo* manga by employing the concept of gender-as-performance. Unlike earlier works that relied on essentialist gender ideologies, *Ouran* utilizes its selfawareness of *shoujo* conventions to challenge established norms, producing a narrative that both engages with and undermines traditional gender roles. Analyzing the series against the cultural backdrop of the Takarazuka Revue provides the basis for understanding how *Ouran* diverges from conventional tropes and disrupts earlier expectations set by the genre.

The historical context of the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female theater troupe that introduced “female masculinity” through the otokoyaku roles, offers insight into *shoujo* manga’s use of cross-dressing to explore gender fluidity. Gender performances within the Revue adhere to societal expectations of the Meiji period, at least on the surface, presenting gender nonconformity as temporary and constrained to the stage, allowing the audience to explore gender fluidity without disrupting societal norms. *Ouran* draws from this tradition yet pushes beyond it, encouraging an open-ended interpretation of gender that resists such restrictions. Haruhi Fujioka’s character embodies this transformation, rejecting essentialist notions of fixed gender binaries and embracing a fluidity that contrasts sharply with earlier *shoujo* heroines.

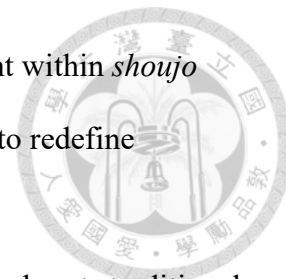
In terms of its contributions, *Ouran* introduced a ‘new’ prototype of cross-dressed heroine by presenting Haruhi as a character who is entirely unconcerned with conventional gender markers. Haruhi’s character shifted away from the typical motivations found in earlier cross-dressing heroines—such as disguising oneself for safety, gaining admission to

male-dominated spaces, or securing a romantic partner. Her approach to gender is neutral and practical, emphasizing that her male disguise is merely a part of her role in the Host Club rather than a defining aspect of her identity. By framing Haruhi's cross-dressing as functional rather than transformative, *Ouran* offered a perspective on cross-dressing as an opportunity for exploring identity without imposing a "gender reveal" moment as the culmination of her character arc. This lack of a defined gender endpoint, combined with Haruhi's refusal to embody stereotypical femininity, exemplifies *Ouran's* contribution to the genre.

The legacy of *Ouran* has influenced subsequent *shoujo* manga featuring female cross-dressing, particularly in the ways gender ambiguity is approached in storytelling. *Ouran* paved the way for more *shoujo* works to explore gender fluidity without relying on the typical narrative resolution of restoring the heroine to conventional femininity. Through *Ouran's* humor and self-awareness, it demonstrated that cross-dressing could exist within a romantic comedy setting while addressing complex themes of identity. This approach has encouraged a gradual shift toward more nuanced portrayals of female cross-dressing in *shoujo* manga, where characters are less confined by rigid gender roles.

Even in the 2020s, *Ouran* retains relevance amid changing ideas about gender and sexuality. Its legacy endures in its playful critique of essentialist gender ideologies, a quality that resonates with contemporary audiences increasingly attuned to the fluidity of gender identities. Haruhi's indifference toward traditional femininity and masculinity remains compelling for readers who challenge binary gender categories, reinforcing *Ouran's* status as a foundational work in gender-subversive *shoujo* manga. Moreover, the Host Club's exaggerated performances of male archetypes continue to provide a comedic yet meaningful exploration of gender roles, making *Ouran* a work that withstands evolving

gender discourses. In this way, *Ouran* contributes to a broader movement within *shoujo* manga toward inclusivity and open-ended portrayals of gender, helping to redefine expectations for both characters and audiences.



Throughout this thesis, a close analysis of *Ouran* reveals how it subverts traditional *shoujo* tropes by presenting Haruhi's cross-dressing not as a temporary disguise but as an opportunity to explore gender beyond conventional binaries—in contrast to characters like Mizuki from *Hana-Kimi*, who is ultimately restored to her “true” femininity through heterosexual romance. Haruhi's approach to gender allows *Ouran* to engage critically with norms of gendered behavior and disrupts expectations of heteronormativity through her interactions with other characters, which remain ambiguous and fluid.

A central tool in *Ouran*'s subversion is its use of comedic approach and humor, particularly within the Host Club setting. The club members perform exaggerated male archetypes, calling attention to the performative nature of these roles and questioning the rigid expectations often associated with gender. Haruhi's resistance to adopting a specific *kei*, or stylized personality, further emphasizes her detachment from traditional gender norms, as she disrupts the conventional dynamics of *shoujo* romance. By framing Haruhi's experiences within comedic misunderstandings and over-the-top characterizations, *Ouran* shifts focus from maintaining gender boundaries to questioning their stability altogether.

The implications of *Ouran*'s exploration of gender extend beyond its narrative, highlighting the capacity of *shoujo* manga to reshape cultural understandings of identity. By framing cross-dressing and gender fluidity within a romantic comedy, *Ouran* addresses complex gender issues in a way that remains approachable for audiences, thus broadening the potential for representation in popular media. The introspective nature of *Ouran* not only deepens the genre's engagement with gender but also paves the way for more nuanced

portrayals of identity, supporting a progressive shift in how *shoujo* manga approaches themes of self-discovery and gender.

Despite these insights, the study has limitations that invite further exploration. This research focuses primarily on female cross-dressing within *shoujo* manga and *Ouran*'s unique stance in this subgenre, leaving room to explore broader gender representations within *shoujo* and other manga genres like *shounen*. Further studies could also consider contemporary influences on Japanese gender discourse, including Western media and global feminist theory, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of gender in manga. Additionally, audience studies could provide empirical insight into how readers perceive these portrayals, illuminating the cultural impact of *Ouran*'s subversion of gender norms. In conclusion, *Ouran* exemplifies a transformative text within *shoujo* manga between the late 1990s and early 2000s, challenging gender binaries and essentialist ideologies through its playful approach to gender-as-performance. By positioning itself as a work that humorously critiques gender norms while maintaining a connection to the genre's historical precedents, *Ouran* allows for the exploration of gender fluidity in a traditionally heteronormative genre. *Ouran* has played an important part in contributing to a growing movement toward more inclusive and flexible portrayals of gender identity in *shoujo* manga, encouraging a broader conversation around gender and identity in manga.

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